



Advent 2

THE NEW SHOFAR

*Do not say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father...
God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones...'*

In the midst of a crushing darkness, God is at work

Isaiah 11 begins with the claim that new life will spring forth from an injured stump: *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.* What is he saying? He is talking to a people devastated by the Assyrian invasion and occupation of the land of Israel. Nothing was left. Those who had not been killed had been dragged off into exile, never to be seen again. It was a time of great horror and death.

God's response? The prophet was sent to proclaim the good news of God's faithfulness. But why the reference to the devastated "root of Jesse"? The Davidic monarchy certainly was cut down, leaving no obvious stump to survive. But it is a significant reference. David was chosen as king in the most unlikely of ways. He was the least significant son, from the least significant tribe born of a father who was nothing special. His pedigree was not what made him king. He was king *because the spirit of God was upon him.*

God chooses and sends those who want to carry out his will

What seems likely is that this image of a stump would have been relevant at numerous points in Israel's history. Whatever the case may be, the text imagines a new beginning for Judah's monarchy. In this hopeful future, Yahweh's Spirit will alight upon the ruler, resulting in justice for the poor and lowly of the land (verse 4) and a fundamental reordering of creation's priorities (verses 6-9). Life emerges from death. This is the way of Israel's God. In the wilderness of their history, God continues to shine a light.

In another prophesy the Isaiah speaks of a "remnant"... *A remnant will return, even the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God (10:21).* This is their hope. There will always be a remnant. It is a bit like God promising Noah that *never again will I destroy the earth...* There will always be a people of God. No matter how small the community of faith is, while God is within, it will grow. No matter how great the opposition, how overwhelming the threat, the darkness, God is working so that it can fulfil its mission.

Despite appearances God is still feeding the world

There is a line standing out for me... *And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.* This is the new shoot that will spring forth, a shoot that will bloom and grow and transform the world. How will this happen? This new shoot is not going to be like the David of old, a king who grew the nation through war and conflict. In **Isaiah 11** this transformed world is spelled out in the most

majestic, most mind-blowing ways... *The wolf will live with the lamb! The leopard will lie down with the young goat; The calf, the young lion; the fattened calf together; and a little child will lead them... They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore (Isaiah 2:2-4).* This is a total renovation of the world in which Israel was living at the time. Those animals that should be tearing each other apart are now living in peace. What is happening is a complete restoration of creation. It is to be brought back to an Eden-like existence. All of this is brought about by a radical intervention by God. The old ways of working (the Temple, priesthood, lawyers, sacrificial system) were not bringing the world closer to a repentant spirit, into union with God and with each other.

The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ Son of God

Mark begins his Gospel by linking Jesus Christ with the works of God in Israel's past history. He is going to be the one who will begin the work of reconstituting the Israel of old. Whatever else Jesus does, he fulfils the promises of old, promises made by God to Israel through the prophets. Those passages predicted this forerunner who would *prepare the way of Yahweh*, this forerunner whom God would call *My messenger*. For the evangelist, he was born into the time when God was acting anew in decisive ways. We know this because before the arrival of the Messiah, the Son of God, there would be a messenger (John) whose role would be to make preparations for his coming. The world needed to be ready, and that readiness would call forth a genuine **repentance** from those who were seeking something new, something the world around them could not deliver. This Jesus was the one fulfilling those expectations set down by Isaiah.

He must increase and I must decrease

However, there is no easy way around John's religious challenge as he calls upon us (through his challenge to the Pharisees and Sadducees) to move away from some of the easy answers religious practices and beliefs may offer. They had come for baptism by John but received a challenge instead: *What makes you think being a child of Abraham is enough to save you from the coming day of wrath?* In other words, God is going to demand more from them than just faithfulness to the Law and temple worship.

Isaiah proclaimed that God's mercy is extravagant, generous in love for all his children. The point here for Isaiah being the way this love is intended *for all God's children*. As he looked around the nation, he saw how the poor and the powerless were in reality, lesser citizens, God's children who lived on the margins, forgotten, exploited or abused. They did not belong and were not allowed into the ranks of the "righteous".

The challenge for us in Advent is to ask if we too have ignored these children of God and yet found comfort in the false sanctuary of religious observances. Repentance is

not so much a “turning from our sins” but a refocusing on ***what God*** wants, not primarily for ourselves, but for the people of our town, our parish, men and women who desire to belong, to be forgiven and to be reassured their lives have meaning and purpose in God.