

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH ADVENT 4 YEAR B 24 DECEMBER 2017

Most of us have very busy lives. We can easily be preoccupied with day to day concerns. Some of them are expected – they're part of our situations in life at home, at work, in church maybe. Others are thrust upon us – an illness in the family, the car breaking down, or whatever. We may think, 'I could have done without this!' With all this bustle, it's easy to lose sight of any bigger picture. And most of us feel more comfortable dealing with the here and now than with the disturbing question of our place in the grand scheme of things.

But in the season of Advent the church encourages us to think of God's purposes – eternal purposes realised in this world of time. We may talk about salvation history – how God has worked through human affairs to accomplish his saving purposes. It is the big picture. Today's readings shed light on this picture.

Let's start with the latest 'event', using the term generally: S. Paul writing to the Christians in Rome. Our New Testament reading was the ending to his letter. The passage doesn't quite make sense as it appears on the page to us: it's not a proper sentence. From time to time S. Paul's eloquence gets the better of him: as my wife Rita remarked to me the other day, "Did S. Paul ever say anything in three words that he could say in thirty three?" It's simplest to ignore the words 'to whom' in the last line. Then the reading starts, 'To God who is able to strengthen you...' and ends (v. 27) '...to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory for ever! Amen.' Everything in between is descriptive, describing what God has done.

The key words of this middle section are '...through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles,...'. Paul had been a devout and strict adherent of the Jewish religion before his conversion to faith in Christ. He was a Pharisee. After his conversion on the road to Damascus he became convinced of two things: first that the Jewish scriptures were fulfilled by Christ – he was the Messiah and Lord; second that the same scriptures taught that the salvation brought by Christ was for all people, not just Jews. Christianity was a universal religion, not just a Jewish sect. This is the mystery of which Paul writes, a mystery once hidden but now revealed or disclosed. God chose a particular people – Israel, the Jews – to have a specific part in bringing salvation to all nations. This is the bigger picture in which the history of Israel is to be seen, a picture bigger than Paul had seen in his days as a Pharisee.

One individual Israelite had her own part to play: Mary, and this brings us to the gospel reading. The event related is the angel Gabriel's visit to her. He told her that the son she would bear would be called the Son of the Most High, and would have the throne of his ancestor David. His kingdom would have no end. We're probably familiar with this passage. Preachers use it to talk of God's gracious love, and the humility of Mary in obeying God's will, a humility we should imitate. But what a shock it must have been to Mary! She could not have known all its implications or what the future would bring. Twice in the early chapters of Luke's gospel Mary is described as 'keeping these things in her heart'. It must have taken Mary's attention away from everyday concerns. There is no explicit reference in Gabriel's message to Gentiles being included in her Son's kingdom, but that would come. When Mary and Joseph took their forty day old son to present him in the temple, Simeon prophesied he would be a 'light to lighten the nations.'

'His ancestor David'. This brings us to the Old Testament reading. After years of fighting, king David is secure and settled in Jerusalem. He resolves to build a house, a temple, a permanent building for the ark of God, and shares his plans with the prophet Nathan. In fact it was David's son, Solomon, who built the temple. Through Nathan the LORD declared that he would make a house for David, the other way round from what David was proposing, a house in the sense of a family line:

Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.

These words remind us of Gabriel's message to Mary. The Christian understanding of Nathan's prophecy to David sees its fulfilment in Jesus, born of the house and line of David. The temple in Jerusalem points towards God dwelling amongst people in the person of Christ. Apart from the specific part David had in salvation history, there is also the general lesson that when we offer to do something for God, we may find his plan is different from what we have in mind.

Advent assures us of God's plan, embracing all nations and all time, to bring salvation, to come to his people, and give them a part in fulfilling that plan. We are part of the community which includes David, and S. Paul and the BVM; that is the bigger canvas on which our lives are written. We may not have the major rôles they had, but as individuals and as a group we are equally valued by him, and called to join in his work. We are part of God's plan to make his salvation known in the world today. Let's rejoice, let's celebrate, let's serve and proclaim!