

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH ADVENT 4 YEAR C 23 DECEMBER 2018

John the Baptist has been prominent in the gospels we read last week and the week before, with his message that people should repent because judgement is coming – a judgement to be brought by Jesus, for whom John is a herald. “After me comes one who is mightier than I.” Today’s gospel takes us back thirty years or so. John and Jesus have both been conceived but are not yet born. Their mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, take centre stage. All our readings have the theme of the old giving way to the new.

The prophet Micah’s message is that the people of Judah should stop trusting in their own abilities to get themselves out of national danger and should start to rely on the LORD to save them. You have to read more of the book than just today’s extract to appreciate this fully. But today’s passage describes a ruler who is to come, who will ‘feed his flock in the strength of the LORD.’ A special significance (rôle) is given to the town of Bethlehem, which will be the birthplace of this ruler. It was the city from which King David came.

The passage isn’t straightforward. Ephrathah was one of the clans belonging to the tribe of Judah, based around Bethlehem. In verse 3 the pronoun ‘he’ refers to the LORD: the LORD shall give his people up until the birth of the new ruler. We may find this disturbing: we like to think of a God who’s always caring for his people. But it may be Micah saying that this is how God is going to save his people, though it won’t happen immediately. God is going to do something new.

Micah may have been thinking there would be a new, righteous king over the Jewish nation, in the line of David. But in the New Testament his prophecy has been read in relation to Christ, born at Bethlehem, descended from David. It is a prophecy of the Messiah who brings in a different sort of kingdom.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews wanted to show his or maybe her hearers (the letter would have been read out in the church assembly) that the sacrifices appointed by the Jewish law have been replaced by the one sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. It is through the death of Christ that sins are forgiven and we come into God’s presence. The writer uses Old Testament texts to prove his point. That’s an interesting method: using the scriptures of one religion to show it points beyond itself. The quotations in today’s passage come from Psalm 40, and the writer puts them on Jesus’ lips. ‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me...’. That was the body that would be sacrificed on the cross. The sacrifices of old are abolished; Christ’s death, fulfilling God’s will, is established as the foundation of the new faith. The final verse of the

passage is rich in meaning. ‘...by God’s will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.’ It’s main reference is to Jesus’ death, but we can also think of the Son of God taking human flesh as an offering. The Son of God’s sacrifice began with his incarnation, when he took the body that had been prepared for him, the body that grew within the virgin Mary. Thoughts of the eucharist aren’t far away, either, in which we are joined with Jesus’ offering and receive his body and blood.

Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, who isn’t mentioned in today’s gospel, are representatives of the old covenant, faithful and righteous Jews. Nevertheless Elizabeth recognises that God is doing a new thing through Mary’s acceptance of God’s will and through the child she will bear. Her words to Mary are largely based on Old Testament texts – a familiar pattern is emerging in our readings. God’s new action is consistent with the way he has revealed himself in the past.

As Advent draws to a close, and the Christmas season begins, we reflect on a God who keeps his promises, yet in a way that creates something new out of what has gone before. His action to bring salvation to the world involved specific people and individuals: Israel, Elizabeth, Mary. We may not have the pivotal rôles that they had, but we can still be open to God’s work, bringing grace in a new way into our lives, and through us to the world in which we live.