

“THE KING IS COMING - 1”
Isaiah 9:1-7

In a world like ours, where there is constantly tension between nations, and war between different factions within nations, you don't have to wait very long for an item on the news about a deal being struck or a treaty signed between two opposing groups. People are always trying to broker deals and calm situations in apparently war-torn areas of the world. And other countries form alliances to work together when they sense a threat from elsewhere – or just in terms of business deals and that kind of thing.

The reading we've just heard – a reading which you will no doubt hear several more times between now and Christmas Day – was first uttered in the context of an alliance between two powers in the Middle East several hundred years before the time of Christ. Things were getting a bit difficult in Judah among God's people and they had tried to forge some kind of alliance with the mighty Assyrian Empire. It was an attempt to improve their national life and their security that depended very much – as so often in politics – on taking the least bad option. But it was an alliance that was to lead the people of Judah into terrible trouble. It was an attempt to improve things that depended wholly on the worldly wisdom of pragmatic – one might almost say Machiavellian – leaders who had left God out of their thinking entirely. And the prophet Isaiah, in a way that would have made even Ian Paisley or Nigel Farage seem mild-mannered and conciliatory, points out the folly of such an approach.

Just look back at the previous chapters when you have time. This fledgling alliance was going to lead to doom and despondency, and the prophet outlines some of the expected problems in fairly graphic detail. Dependency on our own judgement rather than on that of God is always a bad move – and it was particularly bad for Judah, who were God's special race and could have experienced things so differently if only they had relied on the God who had clearly, amazingly and often miraculously helped them many times in the past. They are in dark times and, initially, there appears to be little hope.

But chapter 9, from which we've read this morning, begins with that hopeful word, “*Nevertheless*”. A light is shining into the darkness. There is, as we say, light at the end of the tunnel. As this part of Isaiah's prophecy unfolds, we read that someone is coming who will light the way, someone who will bring rejoicing, peace and justice. And as we read on in the passage, we see that the coming light must be considered in the context of eternity – “*Of the increase of his government and peace **there will be no end***” (v7). There is to be hope in the short and the medium term for God's people, as the history books show us. But this leader will have an impact not just on the people of Judah at this particular time. He will be a “*light for the world*”, “*a light to lighten the Gentiles*” as well.

Who is this person? Well, v6 tells us – this verse that is so much a part of the Christmas story, so familiar to us because we hear it so often. It is so much a part of the Gospel story because it looks forward to the coming of Jesus Christ into this dark and despondent world. “*A child is born, a son is given*” – this leader will come into our world sharing our humanity, bringing together from birth in his own person the human and, as we see in the rest of the verse, the divine. This child is to be a gift – a divinely appointed and anointed gift from God to a world that so desperately needs help and encouragement. This person, this Kingly Messiah of whom we have been reading in Matthew's Gospel recently, will bring conditions which contrast starkly with the darkness of Judah's political situation and with the spiritual darkness of the hearts and minds of fallen humanity.

The prophet then goes on to describe this coming Kingly Messiah, this Saviour, in terms of his titles. The giving of extravagant titles was a common phenomenon in the Ancient Middle East and you still come across it today. Our Queen is not only the Queen of the United Kingdom, but also Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith and a lot of other things as well. The Sultan of Brunei's titles take up several column inches in a newspaper. You may remember Idi Amin. I've just rediscovered Alan Coren's hilarious *Punch* columns from the 1970s when he sent up the East African Dictator whose titles were legendary – everything from *Star of The Orient* to *Top of The Pops* almost! Such extravagance wasn't quite so common in Israel and Judah, however, so this description would have had quite an impact

on the first hearers of this message. And there is no doubt that this coming Kingly Messiah, this Light of the World, the Lord Jesus Christ, who came into our world as a baby to identify with and bring wholeness to fallen humanity, is well described by these four titles. Let's have a look at them one by one.

1. WONDERFUL COUNSELLOR

“Counsellor” is a much overworked word these days. It is used to describe those who work in all kinds of areas where help is needed on an emotional, psychological or spiritual level. In some circles, at some conferences, you can hardly move without being set upon by a Christian counsellor who will – with appropriately spiritual words and expressions – make you feel so guilty about the poverty of your walk with God and the power of emotions and experiences you never knew you had, that you have to seek the help and advice of another counsellor to set you on your feet again. Actually, that's not really true: there are many, many excellent counsellors in all kinds of agencies and organisations who do provide a much-needed and obviously anointed ministry.

But the word Isaiah uses here refers to a far greater concept. This Counsellor is a source of wisdom and guidance, not a purveyor of platitudes. Isaiah has already denounced the folly of seeking and following the ways of human wisdom, but this Counsellor goes way beyond the human to give wonderful advice.

A German theologian called Otto Kaiser translates this phrase as “*he who plans wonders*”. And that gets a bit closer to the heart of what Isaiah is saying here and a bit closer to the heart of who Jesus is. Here is someone who has a plan for our lives, someone who has mapped out before him the way that each of us should go – and that plan is simply wonderful. It is the plan which allows us to enjoy life in all its fullness. You see, without the advice, without the guidance of Jesus we cannot hope to get the best out of life. We may think we're having a good time – or we may be floundering along just trying to keep our heads above water – but God has infinitely more for us to enjoy than we can really take in. He has planned “*wonders*” for us. That's an amazing thought. Whatever advice we may get from our fellow men and women – be it financial, domestic, political, professional or whatever – compared with the guidance that God has for us when we rely whole-heartedly on him, when we take seriously the teaching of the Kingly Messiah, that advice is utter folly.

2. MIGHTY GOD

This is one of those paradoxes of which the Bible and Christian theology are full. Isaiah has just spoken about a *baby* being born – yet he calls this child “*the Mighty God*”. There is the promise of power, enormous, divine power – but it is demonstrated in the form of a helpless infant. That infant grew up to act as a servant, washing the feet of his followers. That Jesus died, seemingly helpless and abandoned, nailed to a crude wooden cross. Where's the might in that? Where's the power in that?

This Mighty God proves his power by making himself vulnerable, by identifying with a broken and shattered race. A god who smashed into our world hurling thunderbolts and scattering plagues hither and thither might have shown one kind of power. But this God came into our world and took on the forces of evil and death from the standpoint of a human being. That's when the power was needed. As one commentator puts it: “*This King will have God's true might about him, power so great that it can absorb all the evil which can be hurled at it.*”

That power, the power of the Mighty God, was demonstrated at Calvary. In human form, God absorbed all that the forces of evil, could throw at him, then three days later burst out of the tomb to show that evil and death were now tamed. And coming back to life as a human being paved the way for us to follow. It's all predicted in that wonderful 53rd chapter of this prophecy. Here is the Mighty God who can take on all the might and power of the cosmic forces – and win!

3. EVERLASTING FATHER

Many rulers in the ancient world called themselves the father of their people. It's still a title – even a reality – in some parts of the world today. Kim Il Sung was considered to be a father by many of his subjects in North Korea, and in some parts of the Commonwealth the Queen is referred to as the Mother of the People. At the church we were part of in London there were quite a few Ghanaian Christians, one of whom was a fairly high flyer in the United Nations. His father died back in Ghana and Steven went off to the funeral. He was a pretty westernised person, so we assumed it would be a fairly ordinary funeral, but when he returned he told us that he had met many of his sixty-odd brothers there, ranging in age from late teens to late sixties. It transpired that his father was tribal chief and, having taken a number of wives (at least, that's what we assume – or one very tired wife) he had become literally the father of a fair percentage of his people!

The relationship which the other earthly rulers who called themselves father had with their peoples could be a very oppressive one – as was the case with Kim Il Sung. It referred far more to their desire for respect and obedience than to their care and concern for the people. It was also a strictly temporal relationship that died with the ruler.

Jesus, though, demonstrates the never-ending love of the ideal father. His example of fatherhood is not demanding or oppressive. It is not a manipulative relationship but one that is based on love and sacrifice. There are those who find the idea of God as a loving father repugnant because of the experience they've had with their own fathers – or maybe they've never had the experience of having a father. But God is saying in Jesus, "Look, I'm going to love you for ever. It's not conditional on what you do for me. I don't want anything out of you but your trust. And to prove that, you can look at what I did for you at Calvary." Jesus died there, St Paul tells us, "*while we were still sinners*", while we were not in a position to do anything towards our own salvation.

Just think for a moment of what you'd like your ideal father to be like. Put out of your mind any unpleasant experiences, any hurts and disappointments: think about the really good times the love and the concern. Then magnify that ten thousand times – that's God, the everlasting Father. And he proved it all in Jesus.

4. PRINCE OF PEACE

Jesus comes to bring peace and freedom. It would eventually come, in limited ways, to the people of Judah. But Jesus brings and confirms real, tangible peace: total freedom. The ultimate peace comes through the reconciliation that Jesus makes possible between God and humanity. Deep down, all of us have that anxiety about the future, about life and death and what happens after death. It's part of our humanity and it's born of sin.

Way down in our subconscious is the knowledge that one day we will have to stand before God – our Creator, the Holy and Perfect Judge. What's going to happen to us? What will we say? What will he say? We know that our lives fall a long way short of his standards, however much we've tried to be good. That leads to anxiety, to fear, to a restlessness that St Augustine described when he said, "*Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.*"

Trust and belief in what went on at Calvary can help lay those anxieties to rest. We can know the peace that is brought by the Prince of Peace as we submit our lives to Jesus and take up his offer of freedom from anxiety. That's the message that is really at the very heart of Christmas. The "peace on earth" of which we will sing and which we'll see plastered over Christmas cards and decorations isn't really to do with peace between nations, nor is it to do with some kind of vague feeling of well-being. It's to do with

the sense of serenity and freedom which we can know when we finally put our trust completely in the Kingly Messiah and all that he has done for us.

This child who is to be born, this baby who is the gift of God, brings in a reign of justice and righteousness – the Kingdom of God which is at the heart of Matthew's account of Jesus' life. It's that Kingdom which was inaugurated by Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, which was shown to be a reality by the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday and which will be fulfilled when Jesus finally returns. You can be part of that as you seek the guidance of Jesus and experience the wonders he has planned for you, as you recognise his mighty power, as you sink into the loving arms of the perfect Father and as you ask God for that eternal peace which only he can give.

"THE KING IS COMING - 1"
Isaiah 9:1-7

This is a passage that is regularly used at Christmas time and there is little dispute among scholars that it can be taken to be a prophecy relating to the coming of the Kingly Messiah, Jesus the Christ. The words were first spoken in the context of an alliance between two powers in the Ancient Middle East several centuries before the arrival of Jesus. Judah had attempted to improve national security by taking what seemed to be the least bad option – forging an alliance with the mighty Assyrian Empire. Isaiah's task was to expose the folly of such a course of action for God's people. The previous chapters are part of that warning and it seems that the people are going through some very dark times.

Chapter 9 begins with a word of hope – "*Nevertheless ...*" There is a light at the end of the tunnel. Someone is coming who will light the way, who will bring rejoicing, peace and justice. That is to be seen not only in the short term, but in the context of eternity (v7). And this Kingly Messiah will have an impact not only on Judah, but on the whole world. In v6 we read about this Kingly Messiah, who will be born into our world as a human baby, but who will also be a gift. He is described in terms of his titles, which would have made quite an impression as such extravagant titles, whilst common in other nations, were not so common in Israel and Judah.

Wonderful Counsellor

This Counsellor is a source of wisdom and guidance. Otto Kaiser translates the phrase as "*he who plans wonders*" – Jesus is someone who has a plan for our lives and for his world. It is only by taking the counsel of Jesus that we can hope to get the best out of life.

Mighty God

It is one of the many paradoxes of Christian theology that the baby who is born will be the Mighty God. The Mighty God proves his power by making himself vulnerable. He showed this power by taking on the forces of evil and death from the standpoint of a human being – and winning!

Everlasting Father

Many rulers in the ancient world (and some still today) called themselves the Father of their people. The relationship God has with us is not oppressive or manipulative, and it is not temporary. Jesus demonstrates the love of the perfect Father.

Prince of Peace

Peace ("shalom") would eventually come, in limited ways, to the people of Judah. But our ultimate peace comes through the reconciliation that Jesus makes possible between God and humanity. Until we encounter Jesus and respond positively to him we cannot know freedom from our frustration and restlessness. ("*Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.*" St Augustine)

Questions for discussion

1. If you had to select one title of Jesus from all those used in the Bible, what would it be – and why?
2. Does Jesus really make his guidance clear to us? How?
3. What was so mighty about Jesus, then?
4. Many people feel that "father" is an unhelpful way to refer to God. Why? Is there any way in which we can redeem the title and make it acceptable again?
5. Share any ways in which you have found Jesus to be a bringer of peace.