

ADVENT III

The Jesse tree, week III

Over the last two weeks, we've been telling the stories of God's people as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, and for his coming again. We heard the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah. We heard about Jacob, and his vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder, and of the renewal of God's promises to Abraham now made to Jacob. We heard about Joseph, favourite son of Jacob, sold into slavery in Egypt, but raised up by God to save many from a great famine. We heard about Moses, called to lead the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. This week we continue God's story.

David

David, the second King of Israel, holds a special place in the stories of God's people. A shepherd-boy, the stories about David tell of his daring—challenging a giant Philistine and refusing to listen to the way Goliath was blaspheming the God of Israel; leading many campaigns to the point that his military prowess was envied by King Saul. David was also a poet, who wrote and sang songs to God, the psalms which we still use in our services and prayers today. His faith was honoured to the point that God promised one of David's descendants would always sit on the throne of David's kingdom, and that among those royal successors would be the King David himself called "my Lord" in Psalm 110. David left a curious legend: the later years of his reign depict an indecisive and unstable leader, whose unruly sons were constantly vying with him for power. Nevertheless, subsequent generations looked back to David as the epitome of God's chosen leaders for God's people: kings who walked closely with God, who were successful in battle (or peace/trade), and whose long reigns brought stability to the people. The promise of David's Son who would sit on David's throne and rule the nations kept alive the dream and prophecy of a kingdom in which the lion would lie down with the lamb, and in which there would be peace on God's holy mountain.

Isaiah

Isaiah was one of the many prophets of Israel, whose ministry spanned four kings and more than forty years. He was probably related to the royal family. His prophecies are vivid, and while the bulk of them are directed at Israel, they also include God's words to some of the surrounding nations. Isaiah was constantly warning the fickle people to turn to God, that if they continued in their wicked ways they would end up suffering, defenceless, wiped out by their enemies. If they followed God's ways they would prosper, defended by God's powerful presence. Some of the most beautiful and moving passages are amongst Isaiah's prophecies, and Christians very quickly came to see these as predicting the coming of Christ, the Son of David who would sit on David's throne:

"For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;

and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”

Daniel

True to the prophets' many warnings, the corruption in Israel's leadership over successive generations resulted in the exile to Babylon. There, the Jewish people looked back to their homeland, their culture and identity shaped dramatically through the exilic experience. Several of their number rose to hold office in the Babylonian empire, and among them Daniel, whom God had gifted with dreams and their interpretation. He became an advisor to Kings Darius and Cyrus, and was probably influential in the return of the exiles to Judah during Cyrus' reign.

One of the most iconic stories about Daniel is his sojourn in the lion's den. After being manipulated by advisors who were jealous of Daniel, Darius decreed that for thirty days the people should only pray to the king, not to their gods. Daniel (and presumably the Israelites) refused, and so was thrown into a den containing hungry lions. The next day the king had Daniel fished out of the lion's den, amazed (and relieved) to see he was alive and unharmed. Daniel's explanation was that: “My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no wrong.” The king then decreed that Daniel's God, the God of Israel, was the only true God (a common pattern in the scripture stories of the exile). Daniel stands as an example of quiet and determined faith in the face of opposition.