

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

www.montreal.anglican.org/comments/

© Chris Haslam

Isaiah 9:2-7

NRSV

In the preceding verse, Isaiah has recalled “the former time” when the northern territories, Zebulun and Naphtali, were conquered by the Assyrians. But, he writes, “in the latter time” God will return these lands to Israel: “he will make glorious [i.e. honour] ... Galilee”. Israel, the northern kingdom, and Syria attacked Judah, the southern kingdom, in an attempt to secure Judah’s help in throwing off Assyrian domination, but (against Isaiah’s advice) King Ahaz of Judah formed an alliance with Assyria. The result was that Assyria annexed Zebulun and Naphtali (including Galilee) and Judah paid a hefty annual tribute to Assyria. Judah also acquiesced to some Assyrian religious practices.

In its historical context, today’s reading may relate to the birth of Ahaz’s son, Hezekiah. Good things were expected of him; he was expected to be the *light at the end of the tunnel*; but Hezekiah did not fulfill the expectations expressed here. Isaiah later (11:1-9) transfers his hopes to a future, undefined, time.

Vv. 1-4 foresee Ahaz’s heir restoring the northern territories. As when Gideon led the people of Israel to defeat the Midianites (v. 4), a vastly superior force, with God’s help (Judges 7:15-25), the people will be freed from Assyrian oppression. Gideon’s war was a holy one, and so will be the one with the Assyrians; in a holy war, the victor takes no bounty, so the spoils of war will be “burned” (v. 5). Then v. 6: the child, born to “us” (Judah), is a gift from God, powerful (“authority rests upon his shoulders”), a counsellor himself (so he will not be led astray as Ahaz was – by false counsellors), a caring and loving father to his people, and a king who brings peace and prosperity (as promised by God to David in 2 Samuel 7:16.) V. 7 reaffirms God’s covenant with David regarding his dynasty. This kingdom will, through God’s “zeal”, be eternally based on justice and godliness. To us, Christ fulfills this promise.

Psalm 96

NRSV

This psalm celebrates God’s kingship. The singing of a “new” song signifies the start of a new era. (The Ark received a new cart for its journey to Jerusalem.) All peoples are invited to “sing to the Lord” and to share in God’s kingship (v. 10a). Vv. 1-3 are a summons to worship. In vv. 4-5, God is more to be “revered” than other gods; in fact, all other gods are just idols; it is God who is creator. Then v. 8: recognize him as the supreme God! He is to be held in awe by all humanity (v. 9b). Then vv. 11-12: let the whole universe rejoice in God, now and when he comes as judge. His basis for judgement of all people will be godliness (“righteousness”, v. 13) and truth.

In v. 1, the author has admonished his readers to “teach what is consistent with sound doctrine.” They are to teach and practice good ethical behaviour, proper living in their life setting, the household, “so that the word of God may not be discredited” (v. 5).

How are they (and we) to do this? “The grace of God” (v. 11), personified in Christ, has come to bring salvation to all people, to enable us to renounce what is immoral, and to live virtuous lives. (God achieves for the faithful “training” (v. 12), true education – something of great value in Greco-Roman society.) We are to live virtuously while we await the second coming of Christ, who is God and Saviour (v. 13). Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was so that we might be cleansed from sin, be *redeemed* from slavery to sin to forgiveness of sins, be made godly, and be people who live ethically (“zealous for good deeds”, v. 14).

Luke 2:1-14,(15-20)

NRSV

Luke is concerned to place Jesus in the time-line of history, as a real human being. We know of Augustus’ attempt to clean up the taxation system: as well as requiring more reasonable practices of tax collectors, he introduced a truly equitable tax: a poll-tax. Every 14 years, a census was held: people were required to present themselves in their ancestral towns, to register for the tax. Records are fragmentary but we do know that a census was held by “Quirinius” (v. 2) of Syria in 6-7 AD. Perhaps Judea was included in a census of 8-7 BC, “the first registration”. From Matthew 2:16, we know that Herod the Great sought to kill Jesus by slaughtering all children aged two or less. Because Herod died in 4 BC, Jesus was born no later than 6 BC. The dates agree. Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem, the city of David, to “to be registered” (v. 5). Jesus is born in Bethlehem in fulfilment of the prophecy of Micah 5:2-5: a shepherd-king is to be born there.

In v. 7, Jesus is treated like any other newborn of the time: he is *wrapped in cloths*, but there may be a message in his being born in “a manger”: animals normally fed from it; Jesus is sustenance for the world. In vv. 8-14, we learn the meaning of Jesus’ birth. Those who hear the pronouncement by the angel are “shepherds” (v. 8), lowly people. David too was a shepherd; in Luke, Jesus comes to the poor, the lowly. The message of Christ’s birth is indeed a joyful one – for all.

V. 11 mentions our great claims as to who Jesus is: “Saviour”, “Messiah” and “Lord”. As “Saviour”, he restores us to wholeness, rescues us from sin and alienation from God. In Jesus, God is present with sinners and saves us from destructive self-isolation to union with him, in a nurturing community. As “Messiah”, he inaugurates the era of heavenly peace: the end-time has begun. As “Lord”, he is God come in human form. The kingdom is for all those whom God has chosen (v. 14b). In vv. 15-20 the shepherds visit Jesus, Mary and Joseph. They tell them and many others the good news the angels have told them.