

A SHOOT FROM THE STUMP OF JESSE

or

A NEW KING AND A NEW WORLD

Isaiah 11. 1-10

Romans 15. 4-13

Matthew 3. 1-12

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today we celebrate the Second Sunday of Advent, when the focus of the Lectionary is particularly on the prophets; so it is entirely appropriate that we look at the Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah that is appointed for today.

Few texts in all of biblical literature are better known or loved than this one, and for good reason. For all who read or hear these verses read aloud, they articulate the deep and persistent human hope for justice and peace; and within the Christian Church, this text expresses the promise of a Messiah who will establish peace on earth. This is magnificent poetry, but it is not a poem. Nor is it a typical prophetic address, for the usual formulas attributing the words to the Lord are missing, and there is no direct address to an audience. However, a prophetic voice speaks, referring to God in the third person, proclaiming what the Lord will accomplish in the future.

What is it that the Lord is going to accomplish in the future? The text tells us that one day, God's reign will come. There will be a new King, and there will be a new world, a new order of creation with the establishment of peace and tranquillity among all creatures, including predators and their prey.

This inspiring proclamation about what God is going to do in the future begins, however, with a bleak image: that of a stump. And indeed, in the eighth century BC

Israel faced the attack of the Assyrian hordes who would ultimately take captive much of her northern kingdom and reduce her southern kingdom into a vassal state. The grandeur and prestige that Israel had known under King David had now faded; and his family tree (represented by a reference to David's father, Jesse) was a mere 'stump' of its former glory.¹

Yet the prophet writes, 'A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots.'

Let us think, for a moment, of something growing where nothing should.

You may know that in front of my Vicarage, there is a paved area of the garden which is elevated. It is that bit of the garden that also features a short wall which faces the entrance to the Sacristy and in which the valuable Communion vessels of St Stephen's were hidden during the Occupation in the Second World War. I cannot tell you exactly when the paved area of the garden was created by one of my predecessors, but I imagine that when it was first established, the stone slabs were all laid carefully, one close to the other. As time has passed, however, nature has reclaimed its rights on that paved area of the garden; and now primroses stubbornly poke their way every year through the gaps between the stone slabs.

Or allow me to tell you about one of my former parishioners in Paris whom I shall call Bridget. Bridget was born of Swedish and Brazilian parents and spent all of her childhood in Sweden, where she showed herself to be a promising student and spoke four languages fluently. After obtaining a degree at university, Bridget was accepted by a prestigious American institution to study for a PhD. Her parent's marriage broke up, however, and Bridget was not able to secure the support she needed from her parents to move abroad and pursue her career. Shortly after this, Bridget's

¹ God had said that it would be so. See the prophecy given in Isa 10. 33-34.

behaviour began to change dramatically. She developed a form of mental illness that meant that her moods, temper and comportment could change suddenly from one moment to the next. At times, she seemed to live in a dream world. She would imagine things to be true that were not so at all.

By the time I met Bridget in Paris, she was chronically unemployed. She would often spend the night in homeless shelters, or would ride the bus to a hospital in the suburbs of Paris, where she would sleep in one corner of the waiting room. Needless to say, when Bridget came to church, people were apprehensive and dreaded her unpredictable changes in behaviour.

I saw Bridget on a regular basis, and encouraged her to get the professional help she needed from doctors and the social services. Just before we moved to Guernsey, Bridget successfully fulfilled all of the requirements for a Master's Degree in Chinese Literature at a well-known Paris university. Most people thought that there was no hope for Bridget, and that no change or progress was possible. But deep down, within that seemingly-dead stump that was Bridget, a mind was seeking to flourish. And it did. Her brilliance pushed its way through the stone slabs and flowered.

Or let us fast-forward. Just last week, I attended a training course near Birmingham for Assistant Diocesan Directors of Ordinands who are in charge of assessing candidates who would like to be ordained for ministry in the Church of England. The criteria for assessing these candidates have now radically changed, as have the meetings (or 'Panels') during which those assessments occur.

I was one of twenty students to take the course. It turns out that I sat very near another priest who was also taking the course, whom I shall call Craig. Craig appears to be in his forties. He wears glasses and has a very full beard. The thing that one notices first about Craig, however, is that he is confined to wheel-chair; and when

one looks at his legs, they are not those of a grown man. They are much thinner and shorter. They could be the legs of a young boy.

During our two-day training course, Craig not only contributed helpfully to our discussions; he moved from meeting to meeting along with the rest of us, without any help. What struck me most about Craig, however, was not his seeming ease of mobility in his wheel-chair; it was his vibrant energy and enthusiasm. Craig obviously loves his jobs: he is an active and committed priest, and he is now helping other potential priests to consider their vocations.

Someone else (me, perhaps?) who had been given the same challenges that Craig faced might have decided to be angry and resentful. To give up any idea of working at all. To give up any idea of serving God. But Craig didn't. In spite of his stump-like legs, he persevered and poked through the stone slabs to embrace his God-given calling and identity.

‘A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse...’ Who could imagine anything growing as they sat on the stump of utter despair? I've sat there myself, and perhaps you have, too. Some of us may even be there now, at that place where hope is cut off, where loss and despair have deadened our hearts.

God's Advent word from the prophet Isaiah comes to sit with us. This word does not ask us to get up and dance in light of our current circumstances. The prophet's vision is a surprising one. The shoot that is to grow from the stump of Jesse will not become a mighty cedar. It will be different from what the people expected. As Isaiah writes elsewhere, ‘For he grew up before (them) like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form of majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him’ (53. 2).

Yes, a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse; fragile, yet tenacious and stubborn. It will grow like a plant out of dry ground. It will push back the stone slabs. It will grow in the heart and mind of a woman whose promising future seemed for ever compromised. It will grow in the soul of man destined to become a priest.

What if you and I were to believe that this fragile sign is God's beginning? Perhaps then we will tend the seedling that is in our hearts, the place where faith longs to break through the hardness of our disbelief.

Let us not wait for the tree to be full-grown. God *comes to us* this Advent and invites us to move beyond counting the rings of the past on the tree stump. We may still want to sit on the stump for a while; and God will sit with us. But God will also keep nudging us, saying, 'Look! Look! There on the stump. Do you see that green shoot growing?'

Amen.