

Study 2 - Hope of all the earth thou art



Domenico Ghirlandaio, Zacharias Writes Down the Name of his Son, c1488

Starting Point...

2. Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

Key verse...

'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the LORD Almighty.' (Malachi 3:1)

Israel's strength and consolation...

(Read Malachi 3:1-4)

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all quote this verse as a reference to John the Baptist, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, and considered very much to be the messenger in these striking words and his call for repentance.

It is a simple message to a people hoping desperately that the long-promised Messiah would be with them soon - 'then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come'.

The promise of a Messiah occurs frequently in the Bible. Orthodox Jews and many others would question the use of ancient Scriptures as part of the bigger story of Jesus, but Christians would argue that although these words speak into historical situations, their ultimate fulfilment is in the birth and life of Jesus, who corresponds to the hope of a Davidic King, an anointed one bringing in a long-awaited kingdom.

The shock is to come with the crown of thorns, and his throne a cross.

‘Who can stand when he appears?’ says Malachi. It is going to be the ones who have clean hands and a pure heart (Psalm 24:3-4). Repentance is an inferred necessity, purification pictured by a fire that refines metals, and soap used with clothing to remove impurities and leave a garment clean.

Discussion...

Q) What was the advantage of having someone introducing Jesus to the world?

Q) How important are the Old Testament passages scholars quote to link Jesus to the bigger picture of God’s relationship with humankind?

Hope of all the earth thou art...

(Read Luke 1:68-79)

Zechariah’s song, known as The Benedictus, gives praise to God for deliverance through the promised Messiah and celebrates the role that his own son will have.

Luke connects the Gospel message with its Old Testament roots, as Zechariah looks back to the goodness and mercy shown by God to the nation of which he is a part, and looks forward to the future role of both John and Jesus in the fulfilment of God’s promises to all people.

Historically, there was a link between deliverance from captivity in the Exodus to arriving in the Promised Land, where those who had experienced the saving grace of

God might serve Him and live out their side of a covenant relationship.

Zachariah also appreciates the importance of the role of his son, who will represent ‘the Most High’, and even if not the prophesied Elijah, then ‘he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.’ (Luke 1:17)

Discussion...

Q) How important is remembrance of the Exodus story to Advent?

Q) We perhaps don’t think of Zechariah as a prophet, but verse 67 tells us he was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied. So, what might that tell us about the role of prophecy in the church?

Dear desire of every nation...

(Read Philippians 1:3-11)

In Paul's letter to the Philippian Church, we see again the thread of Jesus' Second Coming, an important part of our Advent narrative. Paul gives thanks for a group of believers he began sharing the Gospel story with around a decade previously, who have been faithful followers on their spiritual journey to this point in time, and he is confident they will continue to do so 'until the day of Jesus Christ'.

His prayer is full of encouragement for the fellowship at Philippi, that their love, knowledge, and wisdom might grow, so

their lives might become a living witness to the faith they profess.

Paul is looking for fruitful believers, and the fruitfulness he seeks is a life lived in the power of God's Spirit, which he talks about in his letter to the Galatian Church, 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control'.

Lives that are fruitful are lives that shine with Christ's love and bring glory to God. (Galatians 5:22)

Discussion...

Q) Paul speaks of his joy at the partnership in the gospel between himself and the Philippians (NIV verse 4). How does the word 'partnership' fit in with your understanding of Church?

Q) How can we best encourage the Christian community within our local areas?

Q) Does Paul's list of fruits seem complete, or can you think of maybe others that would be helpful to both individuals and fellowship?

Joy of every longing heart...

(Read Luke 3:1-6)

And so, the time is right and although this reading moves us forward several years beyond the birth of Jesus, it connects with the bigger picture that these readings bring to us. God will send his messenger to announce the coming of the Messiah, and Zechariah discovers it will be his son, John, who will fulfil this role and 'go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins' (Luke 1:77).



Raphael, John the Baptist Preaching, 1505

It has been some time since the people last heard a prophet bringing them God's message.

Now, we read of John receiving God's affirmation, as had so many prophets of the past, that this is the moment he has been waiting for, and his brief but vital mission begins, a voice in the wilderness (so much a part of the nation's history with the Exodus) calling the people to a baptism of repentance to prepare for the coming Messiah.

Before a king made an important journey, there was a period of preparation including repairing roads, and so it must be for the Messiah, although here it would be the spiritual quality of lives that needed addressing rather than the evenness of roads, valleys or even mountains.

Discussion...

Q) Preparation was key, we read. Does this echo our season of Advent, and if so, what preparations could churches be making to bring the good news to their communities?

Q) What do verses 5-6 say to you about the mission of the Church?

Q) Look again at the second verse of Charles Wesley's hymn and consider its place in the Advent story.

~~Text~~

'Christmas is a tonic for our souls. It moves us to think of others rather than of ourselves. It directs our thoughts to giving.' (B. C. Forbes)

'Faith is salted and peppered through everything at Christmas. And I love at least one night by the Christmas tree to sing and feel the quiet holiness of that time that's set apart to celebrate love, friendship, and God's gift of the Christ child (Amy Grant)

'Every year we celebrate the holy season of Advent, O God. Every year we pray those beautiful prayers of longing and waiting, and sing those lovely songs of hope and promise.' (Karl Rahner)

Let's pray...

For the lonely, the housebound and homeless, in the area within which you live.