

Study 3 - Born to reign in us forever



Meister von Hohenfurth, *The Nativity*, 1350

Starting Point...

3. Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.

Key verse...

‘And with many other words, John
exhorted the people and proclaimed
the good news to them.’
(Luke 3:18)

Born thy people to deliver...

(Read Zephaniah 3:14-20)

We don’t know a lot about Zephaniah other than he came from royal blood, with Hezekiah as his great-grandfather. It was not a good time for the nation as they had drifted away from God and now was an ideal moment for a prophetic voice to be heard.

There are harsh words for the surrounding nations, but God’s judgment is also for Judah and Jerusalem, with a message that ‘The great day of the Lord is near – near and coming quickly’ (Zephaniah 1:14).

But, says the prophet, for those who trust in the name of the Lord, the meek and humble, a remnant of Israel whose lives are untainted

by the arrogance of so many, there is hope of restoration. ‘Daughter of Zion’ refers to the gathered remnant of Israel.

And in these poetic words, generations have seen a picture of the messianic age with a time of great joy, as the Lord is with his people. With punishment taken away, singing and rejoicing will replace fear and sorrow, and God will restore the nation’s fortunes.

Discussion...

Q) 'On that day' and 'At that time' are repeating phrases here. Is it right for us to see this as a messianic passage, rather than of a time closer to when the prophet was writing?

Q) When you read this passage from the Old Testament, and from what you know of the New Testament, are there discernible differences in the relationship between God and humanity, represented by the nation of Israel?

Born a child and yet a King...

(Read Isaiah 12:1-6)

Isaiah, along with so many other prophets, has previously said much about the behaviour of God's people and how their sin will incur God's wrath and judgement.

What they must do is turn their backs on the lives that they currently live and, in penitence, turn again to God, where they will find the forgiveness that they desire.

This is a call to the faithful remnant of God's people. Isaiah's poetic words in previous chapters focus on the Messiah (11:11), the 'Branch from Jesse' (11:1) and the child who will reign on David's throne (9:7).

Now this passage looks forward in expectation of the rejoicing when that great day comes. Isaiah's words echo those of the Song of Moses in Exodus 15 as the people passed through the divided waters to safety, 'The Lord is my strength and my song...'

God has become everything to his people, and now with joy they will draw water from the well of salvation, and God will bring them life, spiritually and physically.

Discussion...

Q) Taken in its context, there is good reason for Isaiah to insert a song of praise at this point. Is this one that is relevant to all generations and not just the one for its time, and what does it say to you?

Q) Is there a verse here that really speaks to your heart?

Txrwh#

'My brothers and sisters, may the spirit of love which comes at Christmastime fill our homes and our lives and linger there long after the tree is down and the lights are put away for another year.' (Thomas S. Monson)

Born to reign in us forever...

(Read Philippians 4:4-7)

This passage, from the closing chapter of Paul's letter to Philippian Church might not seem at first glance to have much to add to our journey through Advent, and yet it sits comfortably when previous readings have talked of a messianic age when the Lord is with his people, fear and sorrow replaced by rejoicing, repentance met with mercy and grace, when God is our strength and song and his love becomes the focus of our lives.

No matter how dark the circumstances of life might seem, Paul encourages believers to maintain a spirit of joy in the Lord, show humility and gentleness toward others, and not be anxious about anything. They should bring their concerns, needs, and worries to God in a spirit of thankfulness for past mercies, knowing that the peace of God will guard hearts and minds from despair.

Discussion...

Q) How easy do you find it to bring every difficult situation to God in prayer?

Q) Paul tells us that by handing over our anxieties to God, we will find an inner peace 'which transcends all understanding'. Is this an experience you have known and can share?

Now thy gracious kingdom bring...

(Read Luke 3:7-18)

Advent is a season of anticipation, reflected in this reading from Luke, as word spreads about John the Baptist calling people to repentance, and rumours start circulating that this man might be the long-promised Messiah.

Luke tells us that the people were waiting 'expectantly', aware of God's promise of 'one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord..." (Isaiah 40:3) and in their hearts hoping this was the moment.

Luke certainly saw in John's ministry the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophesy, quoting more of it than Matthew and Mark. His conviction was that all people would now see God's salvation (Luke 3:6).



Bernardo Strozzi, Sermon of John the Baptist, Google Art Project, c1644

John's words to the gathering crowd seem harsh, but he is not really questioning their actions in coming out to be baptised by him, simply their motives. It is not enough to cling to their descent from Abraham as a sort of 'get-out' clause, as what needs to be seen is evidence of a living faith.

John makes it plain that it's not who or what you are that matters, but whether your daily life shows the love and grace of God through action and word. He also emphasises that the time for action is

now, 'I have laid the axe to the root of the trees...' and God is looking for fruitfulness.

Then John reveals he is merely the messenger. There is another who will baptise not with water, but with Spirit and fire (an ancient symbol of judgement, refinement, and purification). This is the coming Messiah. This is the coming King.

And with many other words, we are told, John proclaimed the good news to the people gathered there.

Discussion...

Q) What do you think of John's approach to mission work in verse 7?

Q) How easy is it to feel that because we live in a broadly Christian country, at least in its approach to governance, to think this increases our chances of acceptance with God (as with the Jews of John's generation)?

Q) Repentance was vital, but what did John want to see as the product of repentance?

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

Let's pray...

For all who are searching for faith, that through this season they might, within the Advent narrative, find answers to some of their questions.