

God's preparation for Christmas: Sunday 25th November 2018

Readings: Hebrews 11:2-13; 32-40; Luke 1:68-79

Intro

Does anybody know how many more days 'til Christmas? – 30 or 29 depending how you count. But really it's hard to get away from the fact that Christmas is fast approaching isn't it, especially with the Santa parade going on today. You know if you Google 'Countdown' they will tell you exactly how many days/hours/minutes and seconds we have left!

Of course, in the old days ordinary people weren't able to do anything like that; Instead they would be listening out for 'Stir-up' Sunday. This was Sunday before Advent when the collect or prayer for the day began "Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people ... "

And then all good housewives knew that it was time to stir up or prepare the Christmas pudding so that it would be nicely steeped by the time Christmas came.

So, how many of you are going to go home and make a start on the Christmas pudding!?

How many of you are all set, all ready for Christmas?

If you're like me most of it is still up here (head).

Some people are already ahead of the game – they bought their cards and decorations for this year in the Boxing Day sales; maybe they have been buying presents right through the year; but most of us I suspect, leave it to the last few weeks, with some really last-minute folk still frantically trawling the shops on Christmas Eve, desperately searching for the right present.

What about God? Is he the equivalent of a last-minute shopper? I don't think so. I think his approach is more long-term and long-planned. We get a hint of this, don't we in our Sentence for the Day: "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those under the law so that we might receive adoption to sonship." (Galatians 4:4-5). Other versions say "When the fullness of time had come." God is not in a hurry – he waits until the time is right. This is the God we find right throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

In Genesis 1, whether you read it as spread over a long time or just 6 days, what is clear is that God is making everything ready, making conditions just right, before He creates humankind. We have already seen that Jesus was born in the fullness of time, and in Revelation 9:18 John hears voices from heaven saying that "the time has come" for judgment and for destroying those who destroy the earth.

In the words of the old hymn: 'God is working his purposes out as year succeeds to year.' God's preparations for Christmas, for the coming of his Son, are long-term and long-planned, and we find them recorded in the pages of the OT.

But, as Owen pointed out a few weeks ago the OT has so many stories, some of them quite weird or challenging, and not only that but they are not necessarily in the right order – so how are we going to be able to make sense of what is going on and to tease out from a mass of detail the overall sense of God's plan – his careful preparations for the birth of Jesus?

One way in which we have done this in the past is through the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols which traces the story through a series of selected bible readings – and we are going to do that in our service on 16th December, but another more recent way is through a Jesse Tree. How many of you have come across the concept of a Jesse Tree? Well, I hadn't either but Shiona wanted to use one in decorating the church for Christmas, and as I looked into the idea I thought it would help us to get a better idea of the biblical background for the story of Christmas.

The name comes from a verse in Isaiah 11 (11:1ff): "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might ... " which, of course we see as a reference to Jesus because Jesse's son was King David and Jesus was a descendant of David. In fact, I did wonder about having Luke 3:23-38, as our NT reading – this is Luke's version of Jesus' family tree – but I took pity on the poor reader who would have to cope with a list of unfamiliar biblical names and I chose the reading from Hebrews 11 instead. This picks out for us some of the highlights in Israel's history and the exploits of some of the heroes of the faith. But the idea is the same – there is a back story to the events of the first Christmas.

Let's use the Jesse Tree to help us follow that back story.

With a Jesse Tree the idea is to have some pictures of important people or events in the OT and use them as decorations on a traditional Christmas tree. We have some here that Shiona's house group have made. Some of the names are in Hebrews 11, which was our first reading; which picks out for us some of the highlights in Israel's history and the exploits of some of the heroes of the faith. Some are other famous Bible characters.

[Activity with Jesse Tree]

As we've said, OT is really long with so many stories that it can be difficult to get an overall picture. I like to use the example of Google Earth. Now, if you have ever used Google Earth you will know that you can start with a detailed picture and then zoom out or start with an overall picture and then zoom in until you can see every detail. Often when we look at Bible stories we start with the detail - what happened with David and Goliath and what can we learn from it. That is all good but it can prevent us from seeing the overall picture of what God is doing, the big picture, what some people call the drama of Scripture. In other words the stories in the Bible are like parts of a play or TV series with different episodes;

The 6 Act Story of Scripture.

1. Creation
2. Rebellion (Fall)
3. Story of Israel
4. Coming of Jesus
5. Story of the Church
6. Recreation

So, when we read a story from the Bible it can be helpful to put it into one of these acts or episodes.

I want to unpack the story a bit more so that we can see certain themes emerging, certain things God is trying to teach his people so that they will be better prepared to understand what the coming of Jesus is all about.

- Genesis 1 - God creates the universe: Heb 11:2 “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command.”
- Genesis 2 Adam and Eve live in close relationship with God in the Garden of Eden.
- Genesis 3 Rebellion –Choosing to go their own way and not God’s brings consequences - separation from God and alienation from one another
- Gen 4-6. Things get worse and creation is threatened with total destruction
- Gen 6-9 Story of Noah – A fresh start and God makes a covenantal promise to preserve all of creation, not just human beings, – sign of the rainbow.
- Genesis 12 onwards - God calls Abraham and his descendants to be the people who will show others what God is like. God promises to bless all people everywhere through Abraham’s descendants.
- The story of God’s OT people, Israel, in all their ups and downs.
 - Stories of the founding fathers – the Patriarchs.
 - People of Israel end up as slaves in Egypt
 - Foundational stories:
 - Passover and Exodus – escape from slavery
 - Moses and the 10 Commandments – God’s covenant with his people. God’s dwelling place among his people (tabernacle); sacrifices to take away sin.
 - Settling in the Promised Land
 - Judges and heroes of the faith (Hebrews 11)
 - Ruth and Boaz – preparing for the next stage
 - Establishing a kingdom
 - (Saul) David and Solomon
 - Division into Northern and Southern kingdoms
 - Constantly sliding into the ways of the world around them. Prophets keep warning them and calling them back to God. Isaiah’s prophecies about Jesus - images we are familiar with: - shoot from Jesse; prince of peace; suffering servant.
 - Exile: eventually the Northern and then the Southern Kingdoms are taken into Exile.
 - Prophecies of return and restoration.
 - Prophecies of the future: of lions lying down with lambs etc.

400 year gap (Malachi to Matthew in our Bibles)

How has God prepared his people?

Well, that was a brief overview but all through the long story of the OT God was preparing his people by introducing them to ideas that would find their fulfilment in Jesus. As it says in Hebrews 1 – “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets ... but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”

We only have time today to pick out a few of these but I’m sure we will be looking at more as we journey through Advent.

Firstly, from Eden onwards, God had made himself known to them as a God who loves people and wants to be close to them. In the OT God is present with his people in the tabernacle, and in the NT Jesus comes as Emmanuel, God with us (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23).

Then, from Genesis 3 onwards we see God as the one who rescues people from the consequences of sin. He rescues his people from slavery in Egypt; he is continually having to rescue them from their enemies, and now Jesus is the one who will save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21).

Jesus is a descendant of King David and he comes to establish a kingdom of justice and freedom from oppression - as a good king should.

When we read the NT we see how the writers of both the gospels and the epistles pick up on so many of the themes of the OT and apply them to Jesus. I've just been reading the letters of Peter and they are full of OT quotes which he applies to Jesus. Jesus himself said that the Scriptures spoke about him and it was through their knowledge of the OT that Jesus' followers came to understand that he was a different kind of Messiah and that the message of salvation that he came to bring was for everyone not just the Jews. We can understand so much more about Jesus when we know the OT background.

The Bible is long and layered for a reason. It took a long while for God's people to gain a deeper and fuller understanding of the God they served. It took the experience of Exile for them to break with compromising idol worship. And through it all, God was preparing his people to receive his Son. So, as we turn our thoughts to Advent and begin our own preparations to hear again the story of Jesus' birth, I would encourage you to try to become more familiar with the stories in the OT - they are part of the foundation of our faith. Now, I know, they are not always easy to understand - their world is so very different to ours - and it's easy to get bogged down or lose your way. One thing I found helpful was to read "The One Year Chronological Bible," - which at least has things in the right order. I know many of you follow Bible reading notes like Every day with Jesus. You know we are so fortunate in our day and age that we have access to many resources that help us understand the Bible, so many books or on-line resources - you might even want to do an introductory course through Bishopdale College. Only a few years ago I used to take Jocelyn Griffiths to some courses and she was nearly 90 - so age is no barrier folks!

Lessons for us

Well, we have spent our time this morning focussed on the past - what God was doing to prepare his people for the coming of Jesus. But before we finish I want to reflect briefly on how some of the things we have learnt can help us in our 21st C lives.

1. If you are like me, a lesson I am continually having to learn is that God is not in a hurry. We are an instant generation, we want quick results, but God has his own timetable. We can get frustrated with ourselves, or with other people, or with some troubling situation that we are facing but, hard as it is, we sometimes have to be patient and wait for God to act, not trying to force things along.

2. God is in control and he knows what he is doing. We have been focussing on God's long term plan for creation but God also has a plan for us here at Holy Trinity. We may wonder what is going on or be a bit fearful of what the future might hold as we look for a new vicar, and also for a new bishop. But God is working his purposes out. He knows what we need for the future – we are all part of his unfolding story here in this place and he has it all in hand. So let's keep praying and trusting in his provision for us.

3. Thirdly, I want to take up the idea that we are, each one of us, part of the on-going story of God, the God who continues to reach out to all people. All the heroes of the faith that we read about in Hebrews 11 had to respond to God's call and rise to the challenge of the circumstances they were facing. We, too are being called to listen and respond to God, and to ask what it is that he wants us to do. We need to be realistic here – many of us are going to be limited in what we can do and that's ok – maybe we can support others in prayer or just relax and savour being part of the story that God is unfolding. Some of us, though may need to be asking – "If not now, when; If not me, who?" Just a thought.

4. Lastly, it is good to give thanks for all the Lord has done for us so far. We are particularly conscious of that this weekend with St Alban's 150th Anniversary celebrations. But as individuals, as a parish, and as a diocese there are many things that we can be thankful for.

God is good.

Let's pray.

Loving God, thank you for revealing yourself to us in your Word and through your Son, Jesus. Thank you that the Jesse Tree reminds us of your faithfulness as you prepared your people for the coming of your Son. Thank you for your infinite patience and for your unswerving commitment to us and to all people, and to the well-being of all your creation. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord and saviour; Amen.