

SERMON – 7/12/25
'Prepare the Way for the Lord'

Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." (Isaiah 11:1)

In the front garden of our manse in the Borders there was a tree stump. It was a stump when I first arrived and I never knew when the tree had actually been cut down but it must have been a fair sized tree in its day. I'm told it was a monkey puzzle tree and that it was cut down because it was overshadowing the house and leaving the front rooms very dark. But as far as I was concerned the stump was just an irrelevance, a nuisance even. It got in the way when I was cutting the grass and occasionally when I was digging one of the flower beds I would hit one of its hefty roots some distance from the stump. It may once have been a thing of great beauty, a feature in the garden but for me it was just a stump, its bark rotting, the grass growing up around it where the lawnmower couldn't get in. Even it had been the kind of tree that regenerated from the root, like the famous Sycamore Gap tree that is sprouting again, there wasn't going to be any shoots of new life from the stump in the Castleton Manse garden.

We read this morning about a tree-stump in Isaiah's prophecy. It's actually part of an extended image that continues from the previous chapter where Isaiah has been describing the judgement of God upon Israel's enemy, Assyria: "See, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will lop off the boughs with great power. The lofty trees will be felled, the tall ones will be brought low. He will cut down the forest thickets with an axe; Lebanon will fall before the Mighty One." (Is.10:33-34)

The metaphorical trees of Israel have already been felled. The stump of Jesse was all that was left of a once proud and strong kingdom. Although Jesse was the father of Israel's greatest king, David, he himself had been a poor peasant and so the phrase, 'the stump of Jesse' paints a vivid picture of the leftovers of nothing very much at all. Even though Isaiah was writing just a couple of hundred years after David had built Israel up into a

powerful nation whose influence ran far and wide, things had already gone to ruin. In a real sense, all that was left was an irrelevant tree-stump from Jesse's line, a family tree apparently going nowhere of any significance, a kingly line that was all but extinguished.

But what Isaiah prophesies into that apparently futureless situation is that the Lord was going to do a new thing. From nothing but a stump, even after centuries, a *shoot* would grow and not only a shoot but a *branch* capable of bearing fruit. Isaiah's prophecy finds its greatest fulfilment in the coming of Jesus, which we look forward to celebrating again this Christmas, and in His coming again for which we seek to prepare during this Advent season. And it's the fulfilment of this prophecy in Jesus that I want to focus on with you this morning – the Jesus who came in the humility of the stable of Bethlehem more than 2000 years ago, the Jesus who was crucified and whose death we proclaim in these elements of bread and wine set before us, the Jesus from whom new life in all its fulness has burst forth and who will come again in majesty and glory at the end of the age.

There are three things in that verse with which I began that I think may help us to unravel the significance of this prophecy both in general terms and in our own particular situation – the stump, the shoot and the branch that bears fruit (almost a rhyme!)

First of all, then, the stump, the stump of Jesse. As we've said, this is the graphic description that is given to the kingly line of David about which we can read in the books of Kings and Chronicles, and if you think our monarchy has its problems you should compare it with the monarchies of Israel and Judah! But while Israel's kings it the headlines in the Bible, they represented a more general malaise in the nation as a whole (and maybe that's not so different from our own society). The stump is not just the fruitless kingly succession but also the *people* in their fruitless relationship with God. God's people as a whole were going nowhere – they had once been a strong people whose influence was felt throughout the ancient world, but now only a remnant remained. Like the church in our land perhaps, once

influential but now just an irrelevant stump, a felled tree, the signs of whose former vitality are largely gone.

More fundamentally still the stump can be seen to be representative of an even greater and more significant fall. What a glorious and perfect creation God had made in the beginning and what a great and fruitful tree was felled when Adam and Eve were banished from the paradise garden because of their rebellion against God. All the potential that there was with human beings in fellowship with God was cut off and there was no future any more. The Lord banished them from Eden and from His presence and rather like a dead tree stump that simply cannot will itself back into life, it would not be possible for men and women to find their own way back to life and back into Paradise.

Isaiah's tree-stump speaks not only of Israel's kingly line, not even only of Israel but ultimately of all humanity, cut off from God, unable by nature to bear spiritual fruit and apparently altogether without life. A sorry sight indeed.

But the dry stump thankfully is not the whole story. What is impossible with us is possible with God, the Bible tells us, and the shoot coming up out of the stump of Jesse bears eloquent testimony to that hope. The shoot of which Isaiah speaks is surely Jesus Christ of whose coming into the world as a baby in the squalor of a stable we will be reading in the next few weeks, in every way a pitifully weak appearance of God on earth, in the context of human wisdom a ridiculously foolish attempt at overturning the established world order.

The world's way to change things is to carry out a terrorist atrocity. The world's way to put things right is to shower the perpetrators of evil with bombs regardless of how many innocents are killed in the process. God's way could not be more different. Just like a tiny shoot of green life appearing on a tree-stump, a life that it is totally impossible to restrain, God sends His Son to be born in utter helplessness in a borrowed byre far from home, to die in apparent defeat a criminal's death, but to win through to victory in a stranger's tomb. As we sometimes sing: "Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain; wheat that in dark earth many days hath lain."

The origin of that new life, Isaiah tells us, is the Spirit of the Lord, the origin of all life in the beginning, "the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD," the Spirit whom Jesus allowed to direct Him utterly and completely. We read of the Child growing and becoming strong, "filled with wisdom and the grace of God was upon Him," (Luke 2:40), growing "in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and people" (Luke 2:52) until He came to baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire just as John the Baptist had baptised with water, letting loose the Kingdom of God upon an unsuspecting world through His teaching, His miracles and ultimately through His death and resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit to all who would put their trust in Him. Nothing would be the same again after His coming as the shoot became a branch and began to bear its own fruit.

This is where we come in, potentially, because all who follow Christ in faith are members of the same branch, charged with the same responsibility and privilege of bearing the same fruit in our generation, drawing our inspiration and strength from the same Holy Spirit, and preparing the way for the Lord's second coming as John the Baptist did for His first.

What God promises through Isaiah is the fulfilment of all things when Jesus returns in glory. "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." (Isaiah 11:6-9)

The vision we are given is of a complete restoration of the original tree, the paradise Garden of Eden. Where in our broken world animal eats animal, in the Kingdom of God the lion will eat straw like the ox; where now conflict is all pervasive, then all will lie down together in peace – the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them – such will be the order and peace that even the tiniest infant will be able to exercise the

dominion that was given to our first parents. The enmity that God told Eve would be constantly between her descendants and the serpent is overcome and the infant will play safely with snakes. A new way altogether is established, as different from the old as a fruit-bearing tree is different from a dead and rotting stump.

I know I am not alone in being tempted to despair as I look around at the ways of the world or at the demise of the church. Keeping up with the news is often profoundly disturbing. What passes for the celebration of the coming of the Christ-child, the transforming green shoot, stands in obscene opposition to the ongoing lines of refugees like Mary and Joseph, to the continuation of circumstances in which children are born like Jesus in squalor, and to the everyday normality of situations which make Herod's massacre of the innocents look like a picnic.

Our culture is as dead, spiritually, as the tree-stump in my old garden. Still our fallen humanity is in desperate need of redemption. But thanks be to God, a shoot has come up from the stump of Jesse and from his roots a Branch is bearing fruit. Even amid the noise of this world's Christmas people are longing to hear the still, small voice. The cry of the Christ-child tugs at many people's hearts and though most may dismiss Him in the rush of the festive season, there comes to many a fleeting moment of Gospel peace when the wonder breaks in.

My friends, it is Jesus Christ alone who will bring new life to the world. For Jesus' sake let the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord guide our lives in these days. Prepare the way for the Lord so that His transforming grace may so change us that we may live out the ways of the Kingdom here and now and hasten the day when the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and when the little Child will lead them.

Come, Lord Jesus!