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Pentecost: Isaiah 11 & John 16:1-15

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The rule of the Branch. The gift of the Spirit.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 11. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear. But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

And he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples, of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious. In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that remains of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the banished of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah.

From the four corners of the earth the jealousy of Ephraim shall depart, and those who harass Judah shall be cut off. Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not harass Ephraim. But they shall swoop down on the shoulder of the Philistines in the west, and together they shall plunder the people of the east.

They shall put out their hand against Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites shall obey them. And the Lord will utterly destroy the tongue of the sea of Egypt, and will wave his hand over the river with his scorching breath, and strike it into seven channels. And he will lead people across in sandals.

And there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant that remains of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt. Isaiah chapter 10 declares the Lord's coming judgment upon his people, describing the destruction brought by the Assyrians and later the Babylonians as if it were the great felling of a mighty forest, with Assyria and Babylonia being like great axes in the hands of the Lord. Isaiah chapter 10 verses 15-19 reads, And then in verses 33-34, The Assyrians would come and attack Jerusalem, coming near to overthrowing it, but Judah would be granted a reprieve on that occasion.

However, the axe of Babylon would completely lay the land waste. This chopping down of the mighty trees of the land would be so devastating that the Davidic dynasty itself would be cut down beyond David, down to the stump of Jesse, David's father. Jesse wasn't a man of great significance or renown beyond being the father of David, and when the Davidic dynasty is felled, he is all that remains.

The axe of the Lord leaves little behind it. Chapter 11 comes in the context of this. It's a prophecy of promise which speaks into this horrific situation.

The chopped and charred stump of what was once the glorious Davidic dynasty stands in the wasteland of Judah at the end of chapter 10. But chapter 11 begins with the start of new life. A small shoot emerges from the seemingly dead stump.

It becomes a branch, and then the branch bears fruit. The branch is a prophetic symbol. It refers to a messianic figure, one who will represent the Davidic kingdom and restore the temple, and lead the people into a time beyond judgement.

In Zechariah chapter 6 verses 9-15, the branch is seemingly Joshua the high priest. Jeremiah also speaks of the branch in Jeremiah chapter 23 verses 5-6, and then later in chapter 3 verses 15-16. In chapter 23 verses 5-6 he writes, Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king, and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called. The Lord is our righteousness.

In Azar chapter 11 this Davidic branch is life from the dead. David died, and then his dynasty seemingly died. But now it is rising again, and new life is coming up from it.

The Davidic branch, the messianic figure, will be anointed by the spirit, and the spirit of the Lord will rest upon him in a fourfold way. Verse 2 makes four parallel statements about the spirit in relation to the branch. But seven characteristics of the spirit are mentioned.

The spirit is the spirit of the Lord, of wisdom, of understanding, of counsel, of might, of knowledge, and of the fear of the Lord. These are the virtues or characteristics needed for a great king who can protect, establish, and rule his people well. And the branch will be characterized by such just rule.

He will be impartial and equitable in his judgment and execution of justice. He will ensure that the poor and the meek receive justice, both righteously judging their disputes and ensuring that provision is made for them in their poverty. He will also speak with an effective authority that will cut off oppressors and wrongdoers.

The result of the rule of the branch will be the establishment of a new Eden, an Eden that exceeds even the original. The original Eden was a garden in an almost entirely untamed world, but this new Eden will have a peace that flows out into the wider world. Predatory animals will have been tamed and will coexist, living alongside children and the more vulnerable domesticated animals.

The knowledge of the Lord, direct experience of his salvation and familiarity with his character and ways will fill the earth. And when that day comes, the branch will stand as a signal in the midst of the nations, all of the nations flocking to learn from him. The Lord will once again recover the remnant of his people from the lands to which he scattered them.

The nations that were once used to scatter them will now be used to gather them. He will raise a signal and draw them back. The once divided kingdom will be unified.

A new exodus-like event will occur and the people will be assembled from all the corners of the earth, established secure over their enemies. Natural barriers will be removed or overcome and Israel will be replanted, secure against its enemies. This all looks forward to return from Babylonian exile where we see an initial fulfilment of this prophecy.

But there seems to be a much greater fulfilment to be seen in Christ, in whom we see the great realisation of the promise of the Davidic branch. He is the one who rises up as the seed of David. As a root out of dry ground, the seemingly devastated Davidic kingdom will rise up with him and find a new life.

He is the one who will pacify the nations, subduing them to the authority of his word, teaching them peace and taming the once wild beasts. He is the one who has the Holy Spirit without measure, who gathers his people from all the corners and establishes a new exodus, forming a new people in security. At Pentecost we celebrate the way in which Christ, the Spirit-anointed branch, the one who rose from the grave as the scion of the Davidic dynasty, brings justice to his people and overcomes the violence of the nations, teaching them his peace.

Nations that were once at war with each other are gathered to the mountain of the Lord to join in the praise of the Lord's people. They seek the branch there, committing themselves to his teachings and his judgement. The knowledge of the Lord covers the earth, with people of all tribes, tongues and nations experiencing the salvation and the goodness of God.

Old enmities are overcome, and where once all the trees were felled, a mighty forest of cedars rises, a temple of the Lord's dwelling by his Holy Spirit. A question to consider, what are some of the specific allusions to the story of the exodus that you can find in this passage? John 16, verses 1-15 I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. They will put you out of the synagogues.

Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.

I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me. And none of you ask me, Where are you going? But because I have said these things to you sorrow has filled your heart.

Nevertheless I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.

And when he comes he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment, concerning sin because they do not believe in me, concerning righteousness

because I go to the Father and you will see me no longer, concerning judgment because the ruler of this world is judged. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of Truth comes he will guide you into all the truth.

For he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine.

Therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. In John chapter 16 we move to a greater focus upon the Spirit in Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples. Chapter 14 particularly emphasises the Father, chapter 15 particularly emphasises the Son and now we're thinking more about the Spirit.

Christ teaches that the disciples will be excommunicated from the synagogues, perhaps much as the man in chapter 9. It suggests also a sort of legal context. The rulers of the people and the religious leaders will be casting them out of the assembly. But there is an ironic reversal here.

Although the disciples will be on trial, through the work of the Spirit in and through them it will be the world that will be on trial. The work of the paraclete or the helper in John is primarily legal in character. He will convict the world.

At this point the disciples know that Jesus is going away and they're very sorrowful as a result. But they've all failed to ask the most important question. Where are you going? And Jesus has earlier declared that his ascension to the Father will, among other things, demonstrate where he first came from and the entire nature of his mission.

The fact that he is going to the Father should be a cause of encouragement and joy for them. Now, it's beneficial for Jesus to depart because this leads to the sending of the Spirit, introducing a new and a greater stage of ministry. The Spirit will convict the world of sin on account of their rejection of Christ.

And it's worth noting the definition of sin that's at play here. That sin is primarily defined not by breaking commandments here and there, but by the rejection of the person, Jesus Christ. The people have not merely broken a few commandments, they have rejected God's Son, the one in whom the Father is known.

And that is a very different sort of thing. Sin is personal. At its very heart it is rejection of God himself, not just a few commandments.

He will convict the world of righteousness. And I think this is in part because as Christ goes to the Father, the true character of his mission will be revealed. That he has been sent from the Father and so he goes to the Father.

And the fact that he goes to the Father is a demonstration of the truth of his mission.

And after that has been demonstrated, there is a convicting force to that. That this now has very clearly God's imprimatur upon it.

And finally, of judgment, because Satan is condemned. There is a decisive judgment against Satan at the cross and the Spirit declares that fact to the world. Just as Christ did not act on his own authority but on the Father's, so the Spirit does not act on his own authority.

The Spirit will guide the Church and the Apostles most particularly into all truth, not least through inspiring the witness of the New Testament. And this will be through taking what is Christ and giving it to them. And all that the Father has is Christ's.

Now again we're getting at the heart of Trinitarian truths here. We're seeing something about just how tightly connected the persons of the Trinity are within John's understanding. That you can't separate the persons of the Trinity in Jesus' teaching and in John's theology.

A final question to think about. Christ does not come, according to his teaching in John, to judge the world. But yet the Spirit is associated with the condemnation of the world and the coming of judgment.

How are we best to understand the relationship between the ministry of Christ and the ministry of the Spirit in these respects?