

Fourth Sunday of Advent Year C

OT

Mic 5: 2-5a

The first verse of this reading is so redolent of Christmas! It features in Carol Services around the world. Christians will immediately think of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. But of course, the original audience will have heard it differently. Look back at verse 1, the verse immediately before this lection begins. That verse speaks of siege and humiliation. The very ruler of Israel will be struck on the cheek. Here the prophet recalls the regal dynasty whose first representative was David from Bethlehem, three centuries before. Although there had been many dreadful members of this dynasty, who inflicted terrible suffering on the people, God has not withdrawn his promise that this dynasty will never entirely disappear. Indeed, from it will come a new branch.

In verse 2 Micah employs a slightly unusual word for king – *moshel* – reflected in the NRSV translation as ‘one who will rule’ rather than ‘king’. Ever since the controversy over the anointing of Saul as king, the people have been slightly troubled by the very idea of kingship. Only God is the ‘king of Israel’. A human ruler can be no more than God’s vice-regent. The ‘shepherd’ metaphor appears in verse 4 as a practical guide to this vice-regent.

Incidentally, while we’re talking about words, ‘Messiah’ never appears in this text, but Christians have always seen it as Messianic.

Either *The Magnificat* (Luke 1: 46b-55)

Ah yes! The Credit Crunch, the toppling of the mighty from their thrones, the rich going away empty. The rich are sent away empty, the hungry are filled. In our response to the Credit Crunch, as voters, as customers, as investors, can we meaningfully assess our decision-making in relation to the plight of the hungry, those who may be less able to respond to unemployment and hard times.

Those words were written for Advent 3 Year B, in 2008, as the financial meltdown was in full spate. In 2009, a year later, it seems as though at least some of the rich have found their way back into the throne-room and are again feasting on abundance from the bonus fund.

This wonderful poem, like the poem in Isaiah 61, expresses the true character of God, God’s values, concerns, intentions and hopes for all his people regardless of race or faith. As we share in Mary’s song, we are not simply resting on the truth about God; we are conforming ourselves to that truth. One of the New Testament writers spoke enigmatically about “doing the truth”. Here is our guidepost.

Or Ps 80: 1-7

Notice particularly the refrain in verses 3 and 7, indicative of the way this psalm, like many others, was urged in a liturgical context.

The Shepherd of Israel is clearly God, not any human king. As happens quite frequently in the psalms, the people are reminding God of God's promises, and demanding (in effect) that God should remain faithful to those promises. Not that this is a matter of any doubt – but the second stanza of this poem (verses 4-6) laments the harsh times they have experienced.

Epistle Hebr 10: 5-10

By way of preliminary, notice two striking features about this passage. First, the quotation (from Ps 40:6-8) is introduced as the words of Christ at his incarnation. Other biblical writers might well have said 'it is written'; the writer of Hebrews several times attributes these words to the speech of Christ himself.

Second, in chapters 8 and 9 the writer has spoken of the earthly temple as a shadow of the heavenly temple – a spatial relationship. Here he is introducing a temporal relationship: the earthly temple belongs to one era of history (the era of Law), the heavenly temple to another (the era of Grace?).

But at the heart of the matter is the nagging question of sin. Despite the people's faithful regularity in their observance, such sacrifices can deal with sin only at arms length. They can remove (at least, in our heads) the external consequences of sin. We can believe we are forgiven. But does that, in truth, empower us to deal with the next incidence of temptation (whatever form that may take)? This is why the sacrifice of Christ is so important. He offered himself voluntarily; the animal did not.

Gospel Luke 1: 39-45 (46-55)

This reading concludes with the Magnificat referred to above. But the core of the reading tells of the meeting of two women, related to one another already (the idea that they were cousins can be traced to John Wycliffe, the 14th Century theologian and translator). Both pregnant, Elizabeth more obviously so than Mary, they greet one another with joy. Elizabeth's insight into the pregnancy of her younger relative invites thought. Was this an example of those intuitions of women – *I know what is happening to you because it is happening to me too* – or was something else going on? Luke is in no doubt: Elizabeth's greeting to 'the mother of my Lord' says it all.

In verse 45, who is blessed: Mary or Elizabeth? Surely it is Mary, because the announcement of John's birth was given to Zechariah, not to Elizabeth herself, whereas (according to Luke) only Mary receives the news of Jesus' birth directly.

Luke has a very direct way of mingling narrative with theology – or, to put it less strongly, with a deep sense that what is going on here is entirely out of the ordinary.