
Sunday 20th December – The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Readings: 2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16 & Luke 1:26-38

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

God's promise to David

After the king was settled in his palace and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, 'Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.'

Nathan replied to the king, 'Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you.'

But that night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, saying:

'Go and tell my servant David, "This is what the Lord says: are you the one to build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'"

'Now then, tell my servant David, "This is what the Lord Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people shall not oppress them any more, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.

"The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."

Luke 1:26-38

The birth of Jesus foretold

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'

'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.'

'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her.

Reflection

"For no word from God will ever fail" (Luke 1:37) We can sometimes get ourselves in a tangle about whether or not some prayer prayed over us, or some idea that has taken root in our hearts is from God, or not. The Old Testament had a very simple definition, if the message is given in the name of the Lord, if it is in line with scripture, and, crucially, if it comes true; then yes, it is a word from the Lord (Deut 18:20-22)

One of the things that I have enjoyed about 2020 is the way in which we, as a church, have joined together to read the Bible using the online Bible platform, YouVersion. This Advent at least 30 of us have been preparing our hearts and our minds for the coming of Jesus by reading, commenting and discussing together (if you want to join us then do check out the details on the weekly email). One of the interesting discussions that has taken place in the last couple of weeks is around the prophecy that today's readings are focused on: that the Messiah would be the promised son of David and that he would establish his reign forever.

This particular discussion arose when someone asked why, in the stories of Jesus, there is such a great emphasis on the fact that Jesus was from the line of David, especially if, as we heard in our Gospel reading, Mary was a virgin. To understand this we need to get into the heads of Luke's original community and readers, familiar with Judaism and the prophecies of the Messiah.

In our Old Testament reading we find David, after he had been crowned King and he had moved into Jerusalem, and he's reflecting on the fact that God had placed him in a mighty palace, but that God's ark still dwelt in a tent tabernacle. David wants to right this apparent injustice, but God, through Nathan the prophet, tells him no, and in a typically Old Testament play on words, in fact rather than David building God a house, God would build a house, a dynasty for David.

As with all Old Testament prophecies, this had a specific impact on David's life. In contrast to his predecessor, Saul, God established David's son Solomon on the throne of Israel and during his reign the nation knew peace and prosperity like no other time in history. But David and his sons didn't remain faithful to God and as a result the kingdom suffered and eventually David's descendants were ousted from the throne and the nation exiled.

But "no word from God will ever fail", so where does that leave the prophecy of Nathan, that God would establish David's line upon the throne forever? Was this not a word of the Lord, or will the Lord somehow bring it to pass? And so, through the other prophets of the Old Testament the people of Israel began to understand Nathan's prophecy in a new light, that one day God would bring a Messiah who would re-establish God's kingdom, and that this messiah would come from David's line.

As we reflect this advent on the coming of the Messiah and his promised return, let us consider the promises of God. Some of these might be personal to you, others particular to those who follow him, still others universal. "For no word from God will ever fail", so his offer of life, hope and forgiveness, his promise of relationship and presence, and the message that he will return and make all things new, are still ours to live with and live by today and until he comes.

Amen.

~ Adam Rylett ~