

We are all very familiar with Christmas trees, but perhaps we are less familiar with a Jesse Tree. You occasionally see them at this time of year, but Christmas Trees seem to have pushed the Jesse Tree aside. The Jesse Tree is really an Advent tree – something that would be put up before the Christmas tree. If you set up a Jesse Tree, you would decorate it with images of the ancestors of Jesus. These trees are meant to tell the story of the waiting of generations of people in expectation of the Messiah.

The image and the idea come from our first reading which spoke of a shoot coming from the stock of Jesse. Now, Jesse was the father of King David, and a shoot coming from his stock refers to a descendant of King David. In a few weeks' time, at one of the Christmas Masses, we'll listen to the gospel of the genealogy of Jesus and hear that there is a line from Jesse and David, all the way down to Jesus. I guess this is what we today would call a family tree. This family tree tells the story of the generations who were waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled.

We all know that the promise was to send a Messiah, and the Messiah would be from the line of David. But what the prophet Isaiah tells us today is about the difference the Messiah would make. The first thing we note is that the spirit of the Lord will rest on the Messiah, giving him the gifts of wisdom and understanding. He will make right judgments about people and about situations. This was important because, as the reading tells us, the times were characterised by a lack of judgement. People were making judgements about others simply on what they looked like or what others were saying about them. In addition, in their judgements, these same people were also favouring some over others, always at the expense of the most vulnerable. When these were the way judgements were made, people ended up being locked in a trap they could not escape. They could easily lose hope. This reading was about giving hope.

The Messiah they were waiting for would have a different sense of judgement. His judgement would arise from his being filled with the spirit of the Lord. His judgements would be made in all wisdom and insight. In other words, the justice of God would be on display. This would be a justice marked by integrity, and it would show forth the faithfulness of God to his people. This is the hope that generations had as they waited for the Messiah to come. They would know he was among them when they saw the world change. The prophet Isaiah captures the changed world with the poetic imagery of the wolf living with the lamb, or the calf and the lion cub

playing together led by a little boy, or the infant playing over the snake's hole. These poetic images tells us that the Messiah will bring about something that seems unthinkable, but also something that will change the world here and now.

John the Baptist belonged to those generations waiting for the Messiah. As we heard today, his message was to get ready for the coming of the Messiah, and many came seeking baptism from him. This was not the baptism we know, but a pre-Christian water ritual for the forgiveness of sins in order to be ready when the Messiah arrived. John also had harsh words for those who would not repent and not change. These were the people who were the leaders and who were regularly making judgements about people and situations. When John called for repentance, he was asking them to show fear of the Lord and to learn the justice of God. He was calling them to have a different attitude to people and events. If their attitude did not change, they would be in no position to recognise the Messiah when he came, let alone be open to baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire that the Messiah would give.

On this second Sunday of Advent, we might think of ourselves as joining those earlier generations who are represented on the Jesse Tree. The Messiah, of course, has already come in the birth of Jesus, so our hope is somewhat different to those waiting for him to be born. We wait for the fulfilment of what Jesus inaugurated. This is still captured in the imagery of the prophet Isaiah. We are waiting for God's judgement on the world – and it is a judgement characterised by integrity where the weakest are not trampled. God's judgement brings a changed world where, in the poetic imagery of the prophet, the lion lives with the lamb. In other words, people do not need to live in fear of others. People don't need to have enemies. We are waiting for the world to respond to the justice of God. This is our Advent hope.

John the Baptist called the people of his generation to get ready. Today we heed that call by learning what God's judgement looks like, and by imitating it. We do this for the sake of the new world that Jesus has inaugurated, and which is still coming to birth in the world.