

The Promise of Messiah



An Advent Bible Study

by
John Birch

Published by Thanksgiving Press

c2013 John Birch. Permission is given to reproduce copies of these studies for individual church usage. It should not be republished in any other way or offered for sale without the express permission of the author.

Contents:	Page:
Introduction	4
1) The Servant	5
2) The Place	9
3) The Messenger	13
4) The Word	17
Opening & closing prayers	21
References and other resources	22

Introduction

Defining our Terms!



The Prophet Isaiah

Let's start by looking at the words "prophet" and "prophesy" in their widest forms;

Prophesy:

- (noun) a prediction of what will happen in the future.
- (mass noun) the faculty or practice of prophesying.

Prophet(s):

- A person regarded as an inspired teacher or proclaimer of the will of God.
- Among Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad.
- Among Christians, the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the twelve minor prophets.
- Among Jews, one of the three canonical divisions of the Hebrew Bible, distinguished from the Law and the Hagiographa, and comprising the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the twelve minor prophets.
- A person who speaks in a visionary way about a new cause or theory.
- A person who predicts what will happen in the future

"Propheticism may legitimately be defined as that understanding of history which accepts meaning only in terms of divine concern, divine purpose, divine participation,"

Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 3, p. 896

"The prophet is neither a philosopher nor a systematic theologian, but a covenant mediator who delivers the word of God to His people in order to shape their future by reforming their present,"

Prophets and Prophecy, Encyclopedia Judaica vol. 13 p. 1152

In this series of four studies, I hope that the group (or individual) will be able to connect with the bigger picture of God's Salvation, revealed through the Old as well as the New Testament.

Often, our experience of the prophetic is limited to those readings included within the preaching season of Advent and we only get a glimpse of part of the picture. By looking at how the Jews and scholars examined the words of the prophets, looking for signs of a promised Messiah, we can hopefully more easily connect with the roots of our faith.

John Birch

Study One

- The Servant

Warming up!

Who in your lifetime would you consider to be a prophet for the generation they were speaking to?

In the religious field we could consider Archbishop Oscar Romero from El Salvador, who in a violent country spoke out against injustice and the violence perpetrated against the poor, and was martyred.

Or what about Archbishop Desmond Tutu, growing up under apartheid in South Africa and using his influence to speak up against the injustice of the society in which so many of his countrymen and women lived.

Outside of religion what about someone like George Orwell and his book Nineteen Eighty-Four, published in 1949 which introduced the world to the idea of Big Brother watching us, and a world where history is constantly re-written to support the current party line?

Can you think of any other modern day prophets, or suggest why those above should not be called one?



A Job Description

"You keep us waiting.
You, the God of all
time, Want us to wait.
For the right time
in which to discover
Who we are, where we
are to go, Who will
be with us, and what
we must do. So thank
you ... for the waiting
time."

(John Bell)

"Let's approach
Christmas with an
expectant hush, rather
than a last-minute
rush." (Anonymous)

There were many prophets in the history of the Jewish people, some say thousands, but most simply had a message from God for their specific time and place, and therefore their prophesies have not been passed down to us in our Scriptures, where we find fifty-five historical prophets (and prophetesses) who had a message relevant for all generations, not just the age in which they lived.

First, and foremost, prophets in the Old Testament were not soothsayers gazing into their crystal balls at a future hundreds or even thousands of years into the distance! Mostly, these faithful people of God were simply fulfilling a direct and inspired calling - to rebuke, encourage, engender faith and repentance, and inform God's people about Himself and His plans. Yes, they were speaking directly to the people of their time, but because God's Word is timeless their essential message of faith, hope and repentance is applicable to people of every generation.

The prophets also warned the people of God's displeasure, telling them what would happen if they continued to behave in a particular way, or ignored the prophetic word - and the alternative outcome if they mended their ways. Call these future possibilities.

Consider the people of Nineveh who were given a stark message from God, via Jonah, that because of their wickedness the city would be

"Advent: the time to listen for footsteps – you can't hear footsteps when you're running yourself."

(Bill McKibben)

"The Scriptures were written, not to make us astronomers, but to make us saints."

(Matthew Henry)

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned."

(Isaiah 9:2)

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

(Isaiah 7:14)

overthrown in forty days. Jonah was almost looking forward to a bloodbath, but the people repented en masse and God had compassion on them, much to Jonah's annoyance (Jonah 4)!

There were some interesting prophesies which directly affected the history of the people of Israel. Read Isaiah 44:28-45:13 and you'll see Isaiah prophesying about Cyrus the Great (not a Jew, but a pagan king) who would be used by God (he even uses the term "anointed") to bring the people back to their homeland. This was prophesized many years before it happened.

At Advent our thoughts naturally turn to what the Scriptures might have to say to us about the coming of Messiah through the words of the prophets, and there aren't that many which actually shout out to us. It has been estimated that "less than 2% of OT prophecy is Messianic. Less than 5% specifically describes the New Covenant Age heralded by Jesus. Less than 1% concerns events yet to come." (Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*, p. 166)

However, New Testament scholars have over time looked afresh at the Scriptures and seen echoes of the Messiah that might not have been immediately obvious either to the Jews or indeed the vast majority of those of us who read its pages. As well as the prophetic word written for its day, we can look retrospectively at a passage in the Old Testament and see something of the life of Jesus mirrored in the text.

This is often called foreshadowing, and is a perfectly valid way of looking at God's Word.

For instance, there's Abraham and Isaac, where God intervenes with a substitute sacrifice for the young boy (Genesis 22), or the Passover Lamb (Exodus 11-12) where the blood of the lamb saved the Israelites from the final plague in Egypt. Paul tells the Corinthians that "Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed."

Let us not forget that Jesus himself saw his life as fulfilling prophecy. In Luke 4 we see Jesus in the temple reading the book of Isaiah where it states, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor..." and He tells the gathered Jews, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Also note his words to the disciples post-resurrection in Luke 24:44 where, "He said to them, 'This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.'"

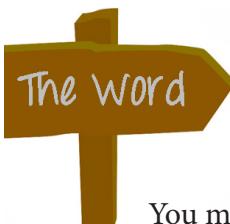


Read Luke 1:26-38 and Isaiah 9:1-7

Key verses:

“But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor 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 forever; his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:30-33)

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)



Looking @ The Word

You may not be aware of this, but the Church (in general) does not insist that its members believe in the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. If this surprises you, then consider that beyond the early pages of Matthew and Luke this is not referred to in the New Testament even by Paul, who sees the most significant moments of Jesus’ life as his death and resurrection.

If, however we take the story of a Virgin Birth literally, how do we begin to understand what is happening?

That Matthew and Luke’s accounts vary suggests that this story was circulating quite widely among the very first Christians, and we know that Luke appears to have based his gospel on evidence gathered through interviewing those who were close to Jesus, in order to give (in his words) an orderly account.

It’s not the science of conception that concerned him (he knew it normally involved both a man and woman!) or whether this made Jesus any more or less human, because in Jewish thought all human beings were created in the image

of God. Here, says Luke, we have the Holy Spirit extraordinarily enabling Mary to do more and be more than she could ever be by herself (which is what the Holy Spirit always does).

More important perhaps in this story are the political ramifications of this soon-to-be-born child. He will be Messiah and also king of the house of David (God promised David a descendent who would reign forever, and over the whole world), and this king would in some mysterious way be God’s son (2 Samuel 7:14).

For the world into which Jesus would be born, this would mean that technically here was a child who would become greater than Caesar, who ruled over the huge Roman Empire (the known world as it then was).

If there had been newspapers and twenty four hour news channels then this would have been headline making material. As it was, except for a few astronomers in a far off place, and a handful of Shepherds who were privileged to see the baby Jesus, the world and the political elite largely

ignored what was happening in their midst (Later echoing Isaiah 53:3).

For readers of this story, as important as the explanation of how God came to earth is the reaction of Mary to God's call to be the one through whom Jesus would be born.

When God calls us, asks us to step out in faith and face an uncertain future, what is

our first response? To hesitate, or respond, like Mary,

"I am the Lord's servant, may it be to you as you have said."



Time for a Discussion

- 1** The prophets all had something in common with Mary, they had heard and responded to God's call at a particular time in their lives (age was not a barrier!)
If there are members of the group who have known God calling them to say or do something for Him, perhaps they could share their experience. How might we all hear God speaking to us in our lives and worship?
- 2** It was very important for the Jews to see in Jesus the fulfilment of historical prophesy, because his appearance could be seen within the bigger picture of God's plan of Salvation for his people. But for us, mostly non-Jewish and generally unfamiliar with their culture, do we need still all those Old Testament references?
- 3** If the Scriptures were so important to Jesus, should we spend more time looking at the Old Testament that He knew, or is the New Testament more relevant to us as Christians today?
- 4** Can you imagine how Mary's story and Jesus' birth might be handled by the media today?
- 5** Prophesy tells us that Jesus came not just as Messiah, or Son of God, but as a king! Through the year, the preaching cycle touches upon the Kingdom of God, but how familiar are you with this concept and what does it mean to you?

Study Two

- The Place

Warming up!

The villages, towns or cities where we grew up often hold a special place in our hearts. Or it might be where we went to college, enjoyed a memorable holiday, met our current partner or settled with family.

Of course, for some there will also be places that hold memories that are anything but good, for whom mere mention of the place is unwelcomed.

Other places take their importance from historical events, the beauty of their architecture or perhaps their association with historical figures (such as Stratford upon Avon, the birthplace of William Shakespeare)

Think about somewhere that has an important place in your life and memory.

What makes it memorable?



Promise of a Messiah

"As I read, my suspicion that Jesus might really be the Messiah was confirmed."
(Jay Alan Sekulow)

"My understanding of the Scriptures has been made simple by the person of Christ." (Bono)

"The incarnation would be equally a miracle however Jesus entered the world."
(Peter Taylor Forsyth)

So at Advent we think specifically of Messianic prophesies, those which seem to look ahead to a time when God would intervene in human history to bring reconciliation between humanity and its creator!

It is of course important to keep a sense of perspective when looking through Scripture. What we don't want to be doing is reading something into a passage that was never intended to be understood that way. We must hold that prophesy is inspired by God, and although primarily concerned with the here and now of life for God's people when the word was shared, it can also bring hope for the future. Let's not forget that only God has the Big Picture, we only see a part!

For this reason there is always going to be divergence of opinion as to the number of prophesies concerning the coming Messiah. The Jewish scholar Alfred Edersheim (1825-1889) in his book *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (available free to read on www.ccel.org) lists 456 passages in the Old Testament that refer to the Messiah, many of which come under the heading of foreshadowing (echoes of Jesus' life and death seen in Scripture).

In fact there seem to be two main types of Messianic prophesies, one fairly general but in language only a Messiah could fulfill, and the second more personal, where the Messiah is called by a specific name. Examples might be 1 Samuel 2:35, "I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his priestly house, and they will minister before my anointed one always,"

"I stand here before you not as a prophet, but as a humble servant of you, the people."
(Nelson Mandela)

"The words contained in (Scripture) were inspired by the Holy Spirit into the minds of faithful men, called Prophets and Seers in the Old Testament; and Evangelists and Apostles in the New."
(Adam Clarke)

"The historian is a prophet looking backward."
(Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel)

"Christ did not pass through the Virgin as through a channel, but truly took flesh and was truly fed with milk from her. He truly ate as we eat and drank as we drink. For if the incarnation was a figment then so was our salvation."
(Cyril of Jerusalem
c.316-386)

and Isaiah 7:14, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

The first had its immediate fulfillment in Samuel, but there's a strong sense in which the fulfillment of this is in the coming of the Messiah. The second is much more specific, Immanuel translates as God with us.

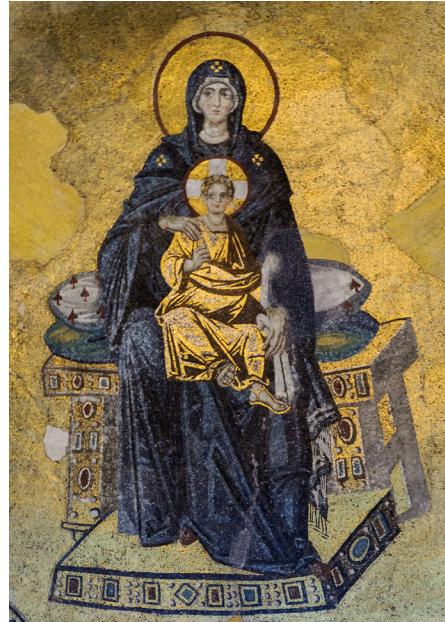
The language of Messianic prophecy is often obscure, understood only in the context of the whole of Scripture's direction of travel, and by those who are familiar with the style of writing. An image such as that of Isaiah 11:1, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit" is Messianic but couched in figurative language.

Scholars looking to piece together the whole of God's plan of Salvation have gone back to Genesis 3:15 and the fall of Adam and Eve, tempted by Satan in the guise of a serpent, where the writer talks about the offspring, or seed of the woman bruising the head of the serpent. In theological language this is known as the Protevangelium of Salvation, the first announcement (or prophetic hint) of a Messiah who would destroy the power of Satan.

As you might imagine, scholars have then found many other passages within the Old Testament which look toward the birth of Messiah, some of which are familiar from the Lectionary cycle of Advent readings, and others more obscure.

Familiar to most churchgoers would be Jeremiah 33:12-16, which contains these words, "'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The Lord Our Righteous Savior.'"

One of the best known and often used prophesies concerning the birth of Jesus is referred to in Matthew 2 when the Magi appear in Jerusalem trying to locate the baby Jesus. King Herod asks his experts where, according to the Scriptures, the Christ was to be born, and they quote directly from the prophet Micah (Micah 5:2) "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."



Read Luke 2: 1-7 and Micah 5:2-4

Key verses:

“So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.” (Luke 2:4-7)

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” (Micah 5:2)

The word

Looking @ The Word

So what do we know about Bethlehem? It's about 5 miles south of Jerusalem, an 80 mile journey from Nazareth. Nearby tradition holds that there is the tomb of Rachel (Genesis 35:19; 48:7) who was the ancestor of David, and therefore of Jesus. It was to Bethlehem that Samuel came to anoint a successor to Saul (1 Samuel 16:4)

There's an interesting parallel here which is not often picked up on, in that David “went back and forth from Saul to tend his father's sheep at Bethlehem” (1 Samuel 17:5). Who were the first to visit the newly born Messiah, but shepherds tending their sheep in nearby fields!

It was Caesar Augustus (son of Julius Caesar) who issued the decree for a census to be taken. It was he who had turned a Roman republic into an empire with him at the head. He declared his father to be divine, and therefore became “son of god”.

People talked of Augustus as savior of the world and worshipped him as a god.

How appropriate therefore for the baby to be born in the town which was linked to King David, and who would grow up to be called Son of God, Savior and Lord.

This was confirmed by the Angel's conversation with the Shepherds, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord”.

It was the start of a confrontation between the kingdom of this world and that of God, echoing a verse from Daniel 2:44 “In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.”

There's another parallel that can be drawn as to the timing of Jesus' birth. The Empire was famous at this time for the Pax Romana (the Roman Peace), a universal

time of peace when the various populations could travel freely without fear for their lives. How appropriate that the Prince of Peace should be born at this time,

Augustus probably would not have heard of Jesus (his reign was 31 BC – 14 AD) but his successors certainly did and spent time and

resources trying to rid the world of Jesus and his followers.

Three centuries later the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.



Time for a Discussion

- 1 In looking to Scripture to see where the coming of Messiah might be hinted at, do you think it is essential, as some scholars have, to go back to the very beginning of human interaction with God, and to the Fall as it is written about in the early chapters of Genesis?
If so, why do you think it might have taken so long for God to act?
- 2 We sing hymns through Advent which call Jesus *Immanuel*, God with us. How would you explain what this means to someone who is unfamiliar with the language used in church?
- 3 Can you suggest why it was shepherds from the fields surrounding Bethlehem who were the only ones with an official invite to the birth of Jesus, rather than the other visitors packed into every available room in the town? What do you think made them special?
- 4 The great biologist Thomas Huxley (1825-1895) coined the word “agnostic” to describe his theology, and was an advocate of Darwin’s theory on evolution. He is quoted as saying, “Science reckons many prophets, but there is not even a promise of a Messiah.”
Do you think the world might still be looking for some kind of Messiah, and if so, what sort?

Study Three

- The Messenger

Warning up!

Prediction can be a profitable business. Those who saw the financial crisis of 2008 on the horizon presumably made a lot of money before the majority of us lost some!

Economist Nouriel Roubini was one such 'prophet of doom'. In 2006 he was ridiculed for identifying massive vulnerability in the US banking system and predicting its collapse. Now he's a guru!

We live in an age of information overload, so how easy is it to look at what is going on in the world, our own country, or even our own town or street, and form an opinion of what's likely to happen over the next five years if action is not taken?

What would you predict?

How likely would it be that you would actually do anything about your concerns, if indeed they are concerns?



Messianic Echoes!

"we get no deeper into Christ than we allow him to get into us."
(John Henry Jowett)

"The word of God is plain in itself; and if there appear any obscurity in one place, the Holy Ghost, which is never contrarious to himself, explains the same more clearly in other places."
(John Knox)

"Faith is to believe what you do not yet see; the reward for this faith is to see what you believe."
(Augustine of Hippo)

"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.... And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (part of Jeremiah 31:31-34)

When looking at prophesies pointing toward Jesus in the Old Testament it would be remiss of us to stop at his birth, because there are echoes of his life contained within the Scriptures which are important to our understanding of the bigger picture of his life, and God's plan of Salvation in general. This is the foreshadowing that we looked at briefly in our first study – as we look at the Scriptures we suddenly come across a passage which seems to contain an image of an aspect of Jesus' life, even if it was written to a different context.

As an example, Psalm 41 finds a deeply worried David pouring out his heart in poetic prayer to God. In verse 9 he says, "Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." This is a very personal cry from David, who feels betrayed, but put beside Matthew 26:21-25 and the last supper as Jesus looks at his disciples dipping bread into wine, it takes on a different meaning, "Jesus replied, "The one

"I always avoid prophesying beforehand, because it is a much better policy to prophesy after the event has already taken place!"
(Winston Churchill)

"Soulish believers are inordinately curious. For example, simply for the sake of knowing what the future holds do they try to satisfy their curiosity by studying thoroughly the prophecies of the Bible."

(Watchman Nee)

"Revelation is the act of God whereby what once was concealed from men is now made known to them." (John Piper, The Wisdom We Speak, 1 Corinthians 2:6-13, July 20, 1980)

"Deeply consider that it is your duty and interest to read the Holy Scriptures." (Adam Clarke)



who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me."

Bible Scholars give us a host of Old Testament verses that have similar resonance for the Christian, here's a few,

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder, and he will be called 'Wonderful Counselor Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'" (Isaiah 9:5)

"Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."
(Zechariah 9:9 - compare with Luke 19:35-38)

"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."
(Isaiah 53:3 - compare with Luke 23:20-23)

"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."
(Isaiah 53:7 - compare with Matthew 27:12-14)

"They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing" (Psalm 22:18 - compare with Matthew 27:35-36)

"...the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter." (part of Isaiah 53:5-12 - compare with John 1:29)

And finally, "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'."
(Psalm 110:1 - compare with Mark 16:19)

Opinions vary as to the precise number of passages within the Old Testament that Christians can realistically claim have been fulfilled in the birth, life and death of Jesus – in fact anything from 48 to over 365 according to one source. Jesus certainly saw his life and purpose as being in fulfillment of the Scriptures (Luke 24:44) so Christians cannot ignore this aspect of study, as it enables us to more easily place him in the grand picture of God's plan for Salvation.

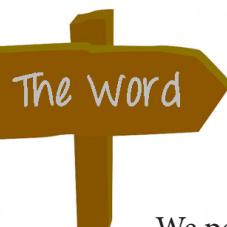
Read Mark 1:1-8 and Isaiah 40:1-5

Key verses:

“A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’” (Isaiah 40:3-5)

“‘I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,’ says the LORD Almighty.” (Malachi 3:1)

“And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.” (Mark 1:4,5)



We perhaps think of John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness with the sole aim perhaps of announcing the arrival of the Messiah, but his message was a stern call to repentance and a holy life. This is an important point because it resonates with the prophetic word of Isaiah and Malachi, from which Mark quotes.

The priests in Malachi's day were offering poor quality sacrifices and failing in their sacred duty. There's was a second class service to God. The messenger would come to cleanse and purify worship in the temple before the Anointed One of God appeared on earth.

That was the significance of John's appearance, a call to repentance and a return to a purity of worship that had been lost. A preparation for the Messiah to make his entrance, both physically and spiritually into the hearts and lives of people.

It is important to note that Jews were familiar with ritual washings, but baptism was actually reserved for Gentiles who wanted to convert, so this was a far more radical challenge than we might assume. John was preparing the people for Jesus' own message, that he had come not just for the Jews but for the whole world. Put another way, it wasn't the Jewish life that belonged to God, but the cleansed life – and that put the Jew in the same position as a Gentile.

John's words and actions were also reminding the Jews of an important point in their history, indeed he could be said to be acting it out – the Passover story of how God rescued them from Egypt, by bringing them safely through the waters and eventually to their promised land. “Come again through the waters,” John says to them, “Leave the world of sin

behind you and know what it is to be really free, when the One who is to come appears and baptizes you with the Holy Spirit!"

God is doing something new, we know this from the story of Mary, and its impact is spreading even though the people are unclear as to what God is doing! Even John seems unclear as to who is the One who will appear. Is it God himself, the longed for Messiah or mysteriously both?

One thing was clear to him. What John was doing with water, the coming one would do with Holy Spirit, with Living Water flowing into lives. Lives that would be changed.

The story is told that when Billy Graham preached in Shreveport, Louisiana, liquor sales dropped by 40% and sales of Bibles went up 300%. In Greensboro, North

Carolina, the report was that "the entire social structure of the city was affected."

When anyone makes a commitment to Christ, when they pass through those waters of repentance and come out the other side, their life should never be the same again. If there's no change then the Spirit is not present and there's no freedom.

John the Baptist warned the people that God wanted to do something new in people's lives, and we are told that many responded to that call. Mary was told that God wanted to do something new in her life, and she responded to that call. The Advent message is very much about God doing something new, and the challenge to the world is always in how it will respond.



Time for a Discussion

- 1** Does the world still need messengers? Whose job might that be?

- 2** Where is the wilderness today where Christians might best connect with those who need to hear the message of John the Baptist (remember the Jews had to travel to John, not the other way round)?

- 3** John's message was addressed not so much to those outside the faith, but those at the heart, the Jews. Are we sometimes guilty of being too comfortable in our religious life, too self-assured, in need of being challenged? Is there anything we can do?

- 4** Look at some of the verses that seem to echo Jesus' life listed previously in this study. Do they help you to better understand the person of Jesus? Discuss how this picture of Jesus looks to you.

- 5** This passage reminds us of the importance of the act of repentance, and the symbolism of the sacrament of baptism. This might be a controversial question to some, but should conversion be accompanied by baptism, symbolising the rising out of the water to new life, rather than baptism being mainly administered in infancy?

Study Four - The Word

Warming up!

It's easy to see within Scripture that tracing ancestors is pretty important, particularly when the parents are going to have the Saviour of the World as a child - the need being to check that the pedigree agrees with tradition!

Have you traced your family tree back in time, and if so how far did you get back, and were there any surprises that can be shared with the group?

Is the link to past generations important in our lives, and can you see any connection between your ancestors and where you are socially and culturally today?

Do you trim your Christmas card list now and then? What criterion do you use, and does this sometime mean the last point of contact with people you've known in the past is being severed?

Is this all part of moving on in our lives or do we hesitate when some names crop up?

Signposts **Prophesy in action**

"Most of the prophets were on the edge, on the outside, over against the institution. Perhaps this is my vocation, at least for the moment."
(Bridget Rees, British feminist and preacher)

"Apply yourself wholly to the scriptures and apply the scriptures wholly to yourself."
(Johannes Albrecht Bengel)

Most of the references to prophets in the New Testament are to those in the Old, either specifically by name, or by quoting from their words. However, should we begin to think that the job of prophet was officially laid to rest when Jesus was alive, we have his own words to consider, "Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward" (Matthew 10:41) and in his stern words to the Pharisees and Scribes, "Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill..." (Matthew 23:34)

We read about Anna, a prophetess in the temple at Jerusalem where Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus according to Jewish custom, and John the Baptist who was considered a prophet (Mark 11:32).

We find several New Testament names listed in Acts who were prophesying, including Barnabas, Symeon, Lucius, Manaen, Saul, Judas, Silas, Agabus, and the four unmarried daughters of Philip the evangelist in Caesarea (Acts 13:1, 15:32, 21:10, 21:8). Paul, in his letter to the Corinthian Church talks as if prophesying is a part of normal life in the church (1 Cor 11:4), and mentions prophesy as one of the gifts of God for the Christian community (1 Cor 12:10).

Remember Peter on the Day of Pentecost quoting from Joel, "And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions."

““Whenever the poor are afflicted or neglected, or whenever human freedom and dignity are not respected, then the Church has a duty to sound a prophet’s note, and it must be prepared to be unpopular on matters which concern politicians as well.”
Basil Hume (1923-1999, former Archbishop of Westminster)

“The early Church had nothing but the Old Testament. The New Testament lies hidden in the Old; the Old Testament lies open in the New.”
(Randall Terry)

“The false and genuine prophet will be known by their ways. If a prophet teaches the truth but does not practice what he teaches, he is a false prophet.”
(Didache, early Christian document)

There were, and always will be false prophets, both outside and inside the church. “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction”
(2 Peter 2:1)

So the New Testament seems clear that prophesy should be a normal part of church life, although with appropriate warnings to look out for rogues. There certainly doesn’t seem to be any Scriptural evidence that God intends to withdraw this gift (or indeed any of his gifts) just yet!

It may also be that we’ve blurred the line in our own minds between preaching and prophesy. Although there are very gifted preachers in the church, not all are prophets.

What’s the difference?

If we turn to Paul, he tells us that a preacher speaks by the authority of the written Word of God, the prophet with the added authority of a special and divine revelation, “I want you to know, brothers and sisters that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.” (Galatians 1:11,12)

So perhaps we ought to consider the type of person suitable for recruitment (by God) for the post of prophet?

The 12th century Jewish Philosopher Maimonides lists the following criteria, “One must be wise, and of a clear and lucid mind; of impeccable character, and utterly in control of one’s passions and desires; of a calm and joyous constitution; one must shun materialism and the frivolities of life, devoting oneself entirely to knowing and serving God.”

When we look at the Bible, we find ordinary God-fearing folk often very surprised at being asked to take up the mantle of prophet. There’s Moses at the burning bush, whose first response is, “Who am I, that I should go...?” or Jonah, who ran off in the opposite direction to that which God wanted him to go. Jeremiah told God he was too young to speak for him, and even Isaiah was not initially enthusiastic, ““Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...”

In other words it could be people like us!



Read John 1:1-14 and Isaiah 49:6; 53:3-5

Key verses:

“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6)

“He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.” (Isaiah 53:3)

“The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:9-12)

The Word

Looking @ The Word

John's gospel takes us right back to the beginning of our Bibles and Genesis, which is appropriate if we're looking at prophecy and the way in which the Scriptures reveal Jesus Christ to us. John starts cryptically by referring to The Word (logos). To Greek readers that would have meant reason. For Jews *logos* was the revelation of God's character. But John goes further by saying that the Word was with God (suggesting relationship) and the Word was God (meaning not the same person but having the nature of). The NEB expresses this as “What God was, the Word was.”

William Barclay explains it this way, “What Jesus did was to upon a window of time that we might see the eternal and unchanging love of God.”

John begins his gospel by nailing his colors to the mast and declaring the nature of Jesus – he is the life and light of

humankind (Genesis 1:3), which means that through Jesus those who believe might have eternal life (3:16) and be justified before God (5:24) as Jesus brings his revealing light into the darkness and confusion of our lives. We see ourselves as we really are in the light of Jesus!

John then shows us in his gospel how people failed to understand this essential fact, until maybe Thomas' confession of faith (20:28) after Jesus' resurrection.

We might look at the Scriptures and be somewhat surprised at how slow even Jesus' closest friends were in understanding who he was. Paul in his letter to the Roman Church says that all the visible things in this world are designed by God to lead us to think about the invisible (Romans 1:19,20).

We don't have the advantage of Jesus walking around our neighborhood - so

how do we see God's logos, his will and reason in the world?

We could perhaps point to the order within the natural world, the vastness of the universe and our place within it, or even inward and our seemingly innate knowledge of what is right and wrong. The fact is that Jesus came into the world and his own people didn't offer the hand of welcome, they eventually called for his execution.

God's Word entered the world into God's land where God's people lived, so you would think he would be welcomed, but instead he was rejected. Fortunately, there were some who saw Jesus for who he was, and they were given the right to become

children of God, to know the depth of intimacy that exists between a child and their parents.

When John talks of believing in the name of Jesus, what does he mean?

In Jewish thought using the word name in this manner is not about what we call a person, but rather it's about the nature of the person as far as it is known. So if in our worship we sing about praising the name of Jesus, it has a deeper meaning of praising Jesus for who he is. If we say we put our trust in the name of Jesus, we trust him because we know what he is like - and he is the light by which we see the true character of God.



Time for a Discussion

- 1** Think about all the bits and pieces that go together to make a family Christmas celebration; presents, cards, tree, decorations, wrapping paper, cake, pudding, TV specials, feasting, drinking, partying, family get-togethers, carol singing, shopping - how many of these (and any others we could mention) can be said to contain something of an echo of the 'reason for the season'?
- 2** If we look honestly at the world today, what place do Mary and indeed the Christ child have in the celebrations surrounding Christmas? Are we still seeing Isaiah's prophesy being fulfilled?
- 3** When the world, and particularly the evangelical atheists whose voices are often heard, ridicule religion, and particularly the Christian faith, who are they attacking?
- 4** Prophets in the Old Testament often brought God's complaints against the way that the poor and vulnerable were being treated (Amos 5:11-15) because justice is at the heart of God. Organizations such as Christian Aid campaign loudly against injustice and unfair trading conditions which disadvantage the poor in the world. Should Christians more readily take up what is a prophetic call? How might you get involved?
- 5** One of the Prophetic calls at Christmas is that Light has come into the world. How can the Church get this message to a skeptical world? How would we explain the Advent story in just a few words? Perhaps you would like to try this, in fifty words or less.

Prayers Before and After

Use any, all or alternative prayers as a lead in and ending to the Bible studies.

Beginning

God of signs and wonders,
star and angels,
heaven touching earth,
and the divine
entering human flesh,
be the peace among us
and the hope within us,
that we might become
your holy people
in this and every place
where you might take us.

(A moment of quiet reflection as we humbly confess our sins, and accept the forgiving love of God in our hearts)

Restore us, O Lord, we pray,
bring us back to that place
where we first met,
as shepherds to the stable
hearing angels sing,
as wise men looking for signs
of a coming king.

Bring us back to that place
when our love was fresh,
not embarrassed
to express itself in praise
to the one who sets us free.
Bring us back to that place,
and restore us, O Lord, we pray.

This Advent-time
we remember Mary and Joseph,
giving thanks for their faithfulness,
courage and obedience,
stepping out into the unknown
in the strength of your Spirit,
playing their part
in the fulfilment of your plan
to bring a prodigal people home again.
May their example
be the pattern of our lives,
and when we hear your gentle whisper
grant us courage
to step out on our journey with you.

Ending

Teach us obedience, Lord
in every part of our lives,
ears to hear your word,
hands to do your work,
feet to walk your path,
a heart for all your people,
a mouth to shout your praise,
a childlike faith,
humility,
confidence
that says to the possible
and the impossible,
I am the Lord's servant,
may it be to me as you have said.
Amen

God of hope, who brought love into this world,
be the love that dwells between us.
God of hope, who brought peace into this world,
be the peace that dwells between us.
God of hope, who brought joy into this world,
be the joy that dwells between us.
God of hope, the rock upon which we stand,
be the vision that unites us,
this day and throughout this Advent time.

Shall we share together in the words of the
Grace...

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all. Amen

References

Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild (ed.), The Lion Christian Quotation Collection, Lion Publishing, 1997.

Wright Tom: Luke for Everyone, SPCK 2001

Barclay William: The Gospel of Luke, Saint Andrews Press 1975

Wright Tom: Mark for Everyone, SPCK 2001

Barclay William: The Gospel of Mark, Saint Andrew Press 1975

Barclay William: The Gospel of John, Saint Andrew Press 1975

Nixon R.E: Understanding the New Testament, John, Scripture Union 1968

Tasker R.V.G: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, John, IVP, 1960

Pawson David: Unlocking the Bible Omnibus, Collins, 2003

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. All rights reserved worldwide. Used by permission.

All images are, as far as I am able to confirm, free of copywrite restriction.

Useful internet resources:

A) Generally on Old Testament prophesy,

<http://bible.org/seriespage/incarnation-son-god>

<http://www.askapastor.org/proph.html>

<http://bible.org/seriespage/appendix-two-introduction-old-testament-prophecy>

<http://www.bibleprobe.com/365messianicprophecies.htm>

http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/84902/jewish/What-is-Prophecy.htm

<http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Prophecy.htm>

B) On Jesus fulfilling prophesy,

<http://www.jesuscourse.info/thejesuscourse/extra-pages/jesus-prophesies.html>

<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=5621>

<http://www.crossway.org/blog/2010/12/the-incarnation-how-did-people-know-god-was-coming/>

C) Prophesy in New Testament and today

<http://www.whiteestate.org/issues/Biblebasis.html>

.....and if you want the official line on the Protoevangelion of Salvation,

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/alpha/data/aud19861217en.html

