

Introduction

Though observed outwardly, Advent has become in reality a neglected season of the Christian year, partly because, even in the church, it has become buried under the 'preparations for Christmas' that have more to do with the secular and sentimental than with the festival of the Christ-child. It is also, if observed in line with ancient tradition, an acutely uncomfortable and uncomfoting season because it challenges our values and ethical conduct. In an age that has largely privatised religion, Advent speaks to the public life of community, nation and globe.

Added to all this is the ambivalence and uncertainty that many in the Christian community feel about the classic Advent messages of judgement and the return of Jesus. These ambivalences are acknowledged in the notes that accompany each day's readings in this book. They form part of the discomfort that is inherent in the Advent season.

The sequence of readings continues into the twelve days of Christmas, a time, especially in the southern hemisphere where it marks the beginning of the summer holiday season, when secular life has overwhelmed religious significance. If there is a single over arching purpose to this book of readings and notes it is to restore some balance over against the secular weight that has come to dominate these times.

Let us hear the Advent themes so that we can engage both in deep reflection and vigorous spiritual and intellectual engagement.

The readings

The sequence of readings in the book is based upon the church's choice for each day as expressed in the daily office lections (Revised Common Lectionary). I have chosen to focus upon the Old Testament readings, mainly from the book of Isaiah. So as I reflected on each reading and composed the accompanying note, I asked not only what the scriptural text is saying but what the church is saying by this particular selection. Above all, though, I have sought to be obedient to the injunction, "Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church". In the end, this is the imperative governing all our engagement with scripture.

Isaiah and the prophets

Some readers may be puzzled by the way I treat the book of Isaiah and my references to the prophets. The traditional scholastic position over the last century or more has been that the book of Isaiah is a composite of three parts, each by a different author, commonly known as Isaiah I, Isaiah II and Isaiah III. It was assumed that the first Isaiah I lived in the 8th century BC, the other two individuals in the exile and post exile. Recent developments in our understanding of the history of the Hebrew people make it more likely that most of the prophetic writings come from the exile or immediately before and after, even if they have earlier antecedents upon which they drew. It is possible (and this is the position I adopt for these notes) that the book of Isaiah for the most part comes from the hand of a single individual, the stylistic and theological differences reflecting radically changing circumstances. In this framework, chapters 1-39 come from the period of the exile when the political situation meant that there was no hope for a return to Palestine for the Hebrews; 40 to 55 come from the period after Persia conquers Babylon and such a return becomes conceivable. I envisage the later chapters of this section as being composed during the return journey itself. The final section of chapters, 56-66, come from the time immediately after the exile when the returnees were having to deal with the harsh realities of life and experiencing disillusionment.

The scholastic question about the composition and circumstances around the book of Isaiah remain fully open. These are not study notes but are intended to open us to the Spirit and I hope no one will get offended or hung up because they disagree with the scholarship behind the notes.

The Sunday 'reading' for each week focuses upon the collect for the week as the prayer that crystallises the message and themes of the season.

David Guthrie

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