

God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing the praises of Your name."

"That the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy" – the Jews, brought up on exclusivity, had to learn to value the non-Jewish believers as the equals in the Lord that they were.

10 Again, it says, "Rejoice, you Gentiles, with His people."

11 And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; let all the peoples extol Him."

12 And again, Isaiah says, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in Him the Gentiles will hope."

"Again it says" – more that was written in the past

to teach us (v.4). Paul follows Jewish practice of linking texts by a key word – here "Gentiles" – and draws from all three main sections of the Writings, the Law and the Prophets to show that God has always sought Gentile worshippers.

13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

"Hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" – where we talk about hope in a general human context it is a positive aspiration. On the other hand, the hope the Holy Spirit gives believers – the filling of all joy and peace by the God of hope – is a confidence and sense of security that is hard to describe.

Those who are secure, held by God's hope, have it in them to be peace and unity bringers.

IN PRACTICE Isaiah spoke of change: a new shoot, the coming of the anointed One of God with a righteous, peace-bringing rule, so in tune with God and so disarming of animosity that it would transform every living creature, including mankind. Many centuries later, the last of the OT prophets, John, called people out to the hinterland and challenged them to enter the water as a sign of a repentant heart and attitude, ready for a change in government – in spiritual government. Half a century on, with Jesus of Nazareth's life, execution, rising again to new life and sending of His Holy Spirit still a living memory, the followers of the Way of Jesus are working out what it means to live new lives under a new spiritual government. This is not Isaiah's vision of the fulfilment of this new kingdom order – that will come at the end time – but it is the next-but-last station along the line. The kingdom of God is real, if not completely realised. And the more we welcome the Spirit of Jesus in our lives, and become more aware of His values in the rule and order of life we call His kingdom – the more we realise what needs to change in us. Paul, writing to a socially and racially mixed assembly of believers in Rome, emphasised how this new life in Jesus is His gift to anyone, of any background, who turns to Him. And it is this 'turning to Him' which is the very repentance John preached, and Jesus made the keynote of His ministry. For those of us who value the changing seasons of the church calendar, this is a season to turn again to Jesus, consider how much His Lordship is over our lives, and see His kingdom in a new way.

QUESTION *Being part of the church is a great social leveller and mixer-up of people. How free are we to accept others who who come to share the same values, but from very different backgrounds?*

PRAYER Once again, Lord, I hear the call of John, later taken up by You in the same words, to turn and to change, and perceive afresh what Your righteous and just rule looks like. Enable me to spurn darkness and choose light, to live for You and Your kingdom. Amen.

The Living Word

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Bible readings for Sunday, December 8, 2019, with commentary notes

Bible study on Revised Common Lectionary passages for **Sunday, December 8**
Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme: John, the last of the OT prophets, points to the kingdom

Isaiah 11:1-10 – The coming Messiah will attract all the nations

Matthew 3:1-12 – God's new kingdom order is announced

Romans 15:4-13 – Equality is a kingdom value to live by

Also read: Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Isaiah 11:1-10 – The king of the kingdom will be for all people

The Lord's anointed will return to a new conflict-free kind of world order

1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

"A shoot ... from the stump" – in the context of Isaiah 9-10 a 'forest fire' of the Lord's anger will have destroyed both Judah (deported by both Assyrians and Babylonians) and their oppressors; a remnant will see their Messiah appearing like a shoot from the burned-out stump of David's broken dynasty.

2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD...

"The Spirit... will rest" – the Messiah characterised by the Holy Spirit's empowering and wisdom.

3 ...and He will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what He sees with His eyes, or decide by what He hears with His ears;

"Delight in the fear of the Lord" – an expression of faithful submission, reverent – and therefore wise, Proverbs 1:7.

4 ...but with righteousness He will judge the needy, with justice He will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth; with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked.

"The rod of His mouth" – literally the sceptre; He will conquer by speech with the weight of eternity.

5 Righteousness will be His belt and faithfulness the sash around His waist.

"Righteousness... His belt" – the belt is a picture of being ready for conflict, prepared by righteousness and faithfulness.

6-8 The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.

"Wolf... leopard... lion... bear" – the imagery of Isaiah's time, with a nod to the predatory imperial powers that would be transformed by the Messiah's rule of peace.

9 They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

"Neither harm nor destroy" – nature itself redeemed, and violence displaced by "the knowledge of the LORD".

• **For further study:** compare Habakkuk 2.

10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the

nations will rally to Him, and His resting place will be glorious.

"Root of Jesse" – another messianic title as v.1.

"The nations will rally to Him" – the world mission

IN PRACTICE Isaiah's vision of a far future time stretches the imagination with its visual imagery of new growth after a forest fire, and vulnerable livestock watched over peacefully by their former predators. It is a glimpse into another world order. In the Gospel reading, this new order is called the "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven" and begins to break into the lives of those who drew near to Jesus and His ministry of healings and miracles. Then, following Pentecost, the early church, growing in numbers and in the life of the Spirit, makes the kingdom of God more of an every-member experience. Jesus is ascended but they find they can draw near to Jesus by the Spirit of Jesus. But we are to live in anticipation of Isaiah's more far-reaching vision, the complete new order of the end time after Jesus' return to rule and reign for ever.

QUESTION *How much do we want - and pray for - the return of the king who will be a banner of unity for all peoples?*

Matthew 3:1-12 - God's new kingdom order is announced

John, a latter-day Elijah, heralds the Lord's coming and calls for changed hearts

1-2 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

"John the Baptist came" – John, born to older parents of priestly lineage, lived in a 20-mile wild area stretching from the Jerusalem and Bethlehem plateau down to the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.

3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him.' "

"He who was spoken of... a voice... calling... prepare" – Matthew's story, as direct as John's message, speaks of making a smooth road for a king by getting rid of obstacles – meaning proud and stubborn attitudes.

• **For further study**, read Isaiah 40:1-11.

4-6 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River.

set out in the Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20, was not a new idea. Paul, a Jew, saw in this verse his call to bring the Good News to non-Jewish people and quotes it, Romans 15:9-12 (below).

"Camel's hair and... a leather belt" – a fashion statement in the style of Elijah the Tishbite. A return of Elijah's ministry had been expected again, and John had this call.

• **For further study**, read 2 Kings 1:8; Mal. 5:5-6.

7-8 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptising, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

"Vipers... warned... to flee" – like snakes escaping a bush fire. Pharisees over-emphasised religious practice at the expense of the law's true meaning; Sadducees emphasised the law of Moses but used religion for power and position. John saw both groups as deadly snakes.

9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

"Abraham as our father" – some Jews believed, wrongly, that salvation was their birthright and argued this bitterly with Jesus, John 8:39.

• **For further study** of salvation by faith in Jesus, read Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 3:7,9,29.

10 The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

"The axe" – judgment is poised, John 15:2.

11 "I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes One who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

"Baptise... with the Holy Spirit" – drawing a contrast with water baptism for repentance, John reminds

IN PRACTICE John, the last of the OT prophets, like Isaiah saw into more than one period of time, although preparing for the imminent coming of the anointed ministry of Jesus was his main motivation. He clearly saw through the self-interest of the Jewish religious leaders. He understood Isaiah's words, on several occasions, about the need to clear away the proud attitudes, which were like sharp rocks blocking the highway of the king's entrance. His call to repent, to turn back to God, has a new resonance with today's breakdown of society, abdication of Christian belief, and lack of trust and respect for even properly instituted authorities. The uncomfortable truth is that there is a judgment day coming: more than ever we need to heed the "repent" message to be in a good place for the very different just rule which is coming.

QUESTION *What does "repent" mean to you? What change of attitude would bring the kingdom of heaven into sharper focus for you?*

Romans 15:4-13 - Equality is a kingdom value to live by

Diverse people sharing the same hope can now worship with one heart and voice

3-4 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on Me." For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

"As it is written" – Paul quotes Psalm 69:9 as a prophetic word about Christ's endurance of the slights and actions of wicked men – and uses it to introduce a lesson about how Word and Spirit empowers us to live differently.

5-6 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God

hearers about the spiritual saturation that God had previously promised: "I will place My Spirit within you," Ezekiel 36:27, see also Jer. 31:31-34.

12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and He will clear His threshing floor, gathering His wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

"Burning the chaff" – the choice was to accept the Messiah and be empowered to live well by the Spirit, or to refuse and face the judgment associated with fire.

and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Same attitude of mind" – Or ESV "grant you to live in such harmony with each other". Not just a command, an enabling of the Spirit who encourages and sustains. If we feel loved and affirmed by God, we are able to have generous (and harmonious) attitudes to others.

7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

"Accept... as Christ accepted you" – continues the line of argument. Knowing who we are in Christ, knowing we are accepted, enables us to accept others, free of tensions.

8-9 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify