

Advent Study Series – Names of Jesus (Isaiah 9:6) – St Giles Aintree 2022

Bible Passage:

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6)

Introduction

This messianic prophecy from Isaiah, written seven centuries before the birth of Jesus, is one of the better-known Christmas passages in Scripture. It shows up on greeting cards, decorations, wrapping paper, anywhere an inspiring festive verse may be needed. We’ve got it in our house!

It’s also one of the clearest and most majestic portraits of the coming Messiah found anywhere in the Old Testament. It would’ve brought hope and encouragement – but also perplexity – to its original readers.

For modern readers, whether people of faith or not, this prophetic image can be challenging in a different way. It dispels any shallow or complacent views of Jesus in vogue during the Christmas season. Its beautiful quartet of divine titles makes for a powerful meditation on the power and character of the Messiah that fits well with the four weeks of Advent.

Wonderful Counsellor

Although this is a prophecy about the Messiah to come, Isaiah used identical language later in his book to describe God himself as “wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom” (Isaiah 28:29).

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul wrote that in Jesus “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). Jesus likewise spoke about his own wisdom along the same lines: “The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here” (Matthew 12:42). And all four of the Gospels are brimming with allusions to Jesus’ ability to see the inner thoughts and motives of people and knowing about events before they occur.

But the wisdom of Jesus is also suited to each situation. There’s no generic counsel. He took a different approach with the woman at the well than he did with the blind man at the pool of Siloam, or with Jairus, whose little daughter was about to die. He didn’t speak the same way with Mary Magdalene at the tomb as he did with Thomas in the upper room. And at the death of Lazarus, he engaged Martha in a discussion about the resurrection, but with Mary he simply wept – because he is the Wonderful Counsellor.

Mighty God

Bold statement! The prophet was unequivocal, using the same title for God in the very next chapter of his book (Isaiah 10:21). This wasn't a metaphor for a mere earthly monarch. The coming Messiah would be human, born of a woman, but he would also be God in the flesh.

This same tension came to a head 700 years later, when Jesus told the Jewish leaders that he had existed before Abraham and was one with God the Father (John 8:58, 10:30). He was nearly killed for saying that at that point. And yet throughout his time on earth, Jesus did things that only God could do – control the forces of nature, forgive sins, raise the dead. In fact, before leaving his disciples, he assured them that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him (Matthew 28:18).

The apostolic authors were no less clear about the deity of Jesus. As Paul wrote: “To them [the Jewish people] belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever” (Romans 9:5). He added elsewhere: “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16-17).

Everlasting Father

This third one has been confusing for some Christians. After all, Jesus is the Son of God. How then can he also be the Everlasting Father? As a result, this passage has been used as a proof text for stream of thought called modalism (also known as oneness theology).

However, Isaiah wasn't concerned here with the Messiah's role within the Trinity, but rather with his actions and character. In the ancient world, father was the term for a benevolent protector, independent of familial connection. A king would be described as a father to his people, which is how Isaiah later applied the term to God: “For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name” (Isaiah 63:16).

Jesus is not only a father in this sense, but he's an Everlasting Father who has loved his people from eternity and will care for them forever. The apostle John spoke of him existing with God and as God from the beginning (John 1:1) and as “the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8).

Prince of Peace

Isaiah wrote at length about the peace of God that he offers to his people. Just as the hoped-for Messiah would be the Prince of Peace from his birth, so he would be the means of that peace through his death: “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

Luke picked up this messianic proclamation of peace in the opening chapters of his Gospel. At the birth of John the Baptist, his father Zechariah prophesied that the boy would be a forerunner to the one who would “give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Luke 1:79). And in likely the best-known verse associated with the Nativity of Jesus, an angelic chorus appeared in the night sky over Bethlehem and sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14).

Years later during the Last Supper, with his arrest and death imminent, Jesus promised his followers, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27).

After Jesus’ resurrection, his followers continued to declare peace in his name. In the Book of Acts, Peter introduced his Gospel address to Cornelius with the statement, “As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ . . .” (Acts 10:36). Paul likewise assured his readers that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). Through his death and resurrection, Jesus secured peace with God on behalf of his people and continues to offer it to everyone – asking us to follow his example.

Questions for reflection:

How did you get your name? Did your parents like the sound of it? Are you named after a family member, friend, favourite character?

What does the words 'wonderful', 'mighty', 'everlasting', 'peace' mean to you (if anything!)?

Can you think of a story about Jesus that sums up one of these characteristics?

In Isaiah 9:6, Jesus is called Counsellor, Father, God and Prince. What more have you learnt about Jesus in the above reflections? Any new links between Bible verses?

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1= never and 10=always) how often do you truly feel at peace?

Who do you look to for counsel/advice? Your parents, your best friends, your clergy, Agony Aunt column?

How this passage could influence your prayers over Advent?

Perhaps take these notes home and write a prayer (below) based on this passage for the society we find ourselves living in at the moment.

Next week, Rev Natalie will discuss Icons: How We See Christ. All welcome at 11:00 am!