

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, December 4, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Matthew 3:1-12
“Anticipating peace”

A few years ago, I did a bit of research with QuickVerse, the Bible programme I was then using on my computer. Some interesting tidbits of information emerged, amazingly quickly and easily. Hmm. Maybe I shouldn't have told you about QuickVerse: I might have been able to fool you into thinking that carry that kind of information around in my head.

Interesting tidbit #1: QuickVerse told me that the word “law” appears 255 times in the New Revised Standard Version translation of the Old Testament, and 218 times in the New Testament.

Interesting tidbit #2: QuickVerse told me that the word “judge” and variations of it appear 273 times in the Old Testament, and 171 times in the New Testament.

Interesting tidbit #3: QuickVerse told me that the word “forgive” and variations of it appear 62 times in the Old Testament, and 73 times in the New Testament.

Interesting tidbit #4: QuickVerse told me that the word “grace” appears 4 times in the Old Testament and 118 times in the New Testament.

Now, those tidbits may not come as a surprise to anyone who has thought about such things from a Christian perspective. One perception is that the Old Testament is about with law and judgement, and that the New Testament is about grace and forgiveness.

Of course it is. Everyone knows that. The New Testament itself makes that clear time and again. *The law ... was given through Moses; grace and*

truth came through Jesus Christ John 1:17. You are not under law but under grace Romans 6:14. You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace Galatians 5:4.

But if that perception is in fact correct, then why is it that in the readings for today, what everyone knows turned on its head? Why does Isaiah, one of the major Old Testament prophets, come off sounding as if he were preaching the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? And why does John the Baptizer, the forerunner of Jesus Christ, the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord, come off sounding more like an Old Testament prophet than some of the Old Testament prophets do?

I don't know. At least, I'm not absolutely sure. I do have a theory about it, but that's all it is - a theory. My theory is that what everyone knows – or thinks they know – is not necessarily the way things actually are. Maybe God has a way of looking at things that is quite different from the way we look at things.

And maybe the way God looks at things is the way things actually are. And so an Old Testament prophet can paint a picture of God's reign in terms that fit perfectly with the Gospel picture of God's reign. The ruler motivated by the spirit of the LORD, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. The ruler not judging by human standards, but delighting in the fear of the LORD. The poor being judged with righteousness, and the meek with equity. Peace reigning: wolves living with lambs, leopards lying down with kids, calves and lions and fatlings and cows and bears together, lions eating straw like oxen. Children playing safely amidst snakes. No hurting or destroying. The earth as full of the knowledge of the LORD as the seas are full of water.

John the Baptizer, on the other hand, paints a very different picture. He calls the people to *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near* Matthew 3:2. He calls people *a brood of vipers*, and talks about *the wrath*

to come, and bearing *fruit worthy of repentance*. He speaks about God raising up children to Abraham from stones, and axes lying ready at the roots of trees; and unfruitful trees being cut down and thrown into the fire. Baptism not with water but with the Holy Spirit and fire. Winnowing forks will be wielded, threshing floors will be cleared, chaff will be burnt with unquenchable fire. I refuse to go to pay money to go to the movies to be scared or horrified, but John's message sounds like some nightmarish horror movie to me.

What should we make of the contrast between Isaiah and John? How do we reconcile the two? Can we reconcile the two? I'm not sure that we can or that we need to. Maybe it's enough to recognize that the Word of God truly is a two edged sword, one edge being judgement, the other edge being grace.

Of course, for us who are people of faith in God through Jesus Christ, the edge that is judgement is always tempered with the edge that is grace. In fact, for us who are people of faith in God through Jesus Christ, the edge that is judgement may actually be so tempered with the edge that is grace, that the edge that is judgement is dull and blunt.

Because the good news of the Gospel is that the ruler of God's kingdom is not a judge but a little child. That the ruler of God's kingdom, the one who will lead the new world that God will establish, will do so with all the innocence and openness and charm and gentleness of a child.

Isaiah didn't know – he couldn't possibly have known – the Christmas story as we know it. And maybe it's only as we look back through – and past – the first Christmas that Isaiah's words start to make any sense. But they certainly turn what everyone knows on its head.

Maybe John the Baptist was saying something similar, but from a different angle. For things to be turned on their head like that, for something as radically new and different as a kingdom ruled by a child to become a reality, there will need to be a radically different way of thinking, of

understanding, of living, of being.

All the things that we take for granted, all the concepts that we cling to as the basis of our understanding of God and of life in God's kingdom, will have to be honestly analysed, critically examined, searchingly reviewed, fearlessly assessed, and if necessary, cut down, chopped up, and burned in the fire. The ground will need to be cleared and we will have to get rid of everything and anything that is useless and worthless.

Maybe only then can something new and different come about. Maybe only then can things become as God wants them to be. Maybe only then can we truly understand and be part of the radically different reality of God's kingdom. Maybe only then can a little child truly lead us.