Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Christmas Day I – Year A

RCL Readings – Isaiah 9:1–7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11–14; Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)
ACNA Readings – Isaiah 9:1–7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11–14; Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

Introduction. Christmas is a festival celebrated by billions of Christians (and others) around the world to recognise and remember the birth of Jesus the Son of God, in fulfilment of the prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures. Theologically it is called the Incarnation—God becoming human and living among us!

Common Theme. "The grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all peoples." So starts our reading in Titus. And this is a common theme behind all our Christmas Day readings, "the appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ"! The Isaiah reading directs attention from gloom to joy, with a special child being born with special names. Our Psalm reading is a psalm of joy because the Lord is coming "rejoice before the Lord for he comes…!" And this coming is picked up by Luke in our Gospel reading, a Bethlehem baby born in the line of David. Notice also that all the readings emphasise the universal nature of this salvation "for all peoples."

Isaiah 9:1–7. A Child born, a Son given. The opening verse turns from the gloom and anxiety of the description of judgment in the preceding verses, to "no gloom" and joy in the positive message to follow (NET, note 2).

JSB explains the verbs are in the "prophetic past … which predicts future events using the past tense because they are as good as done. Thus it is not clear whether the Davidic king whose birth and rule are described (vv. 5–6) has already been born (if the verbs are regular past tense) or will be born in the future (prophetic past). If the former, the verse probably refers to Ahaz's son Hezekiah, as many modern and rabbinic commentators believe … Most later readers (both Jewish and Christian) understood the passage to describe an ideal future ruler, i.e., the Messiah."

The text continues with "one of the most arresting instances of antithetical parallelism in Biblical poetry" (Alter, 650):

The people	walking	in the darkness	see	a great light,
The ones	dwelling	in deep-darkness,		a light	shines on them.

The darkness refers back to the judgment in chapter 8, and the light prophesies about the deliverance of the David-like king in the following verses. Luke 1:78–79 refers to the light dawning at the coming of the Messiah, giving light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and guiding our feet into the way of peace.
And then the prophet speaks even more dramatically but not metaphorically: "for a child has been born to us, a son has been given to us." This is pure poetry, but razor-sharp theology! It does not say the Son was *born*, but a child was. The Son was *given*, as he existed in eternity, prior to the incarnation!

NET says: "There is great debate over the syntactical structure of the verse. No subject is indicated for the verb 'he called.' If all the titles that follow are ones given to the king, then the subject of the verb must be indefinite, 'one calls.' However, some have suggested that one to three of the titles that follow refer to God, not the king. For example, the traditional punctuation of the Hebrew text suggests the translation, "and the Extraordinary Strategist, the Mighty God calls his name, 'Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'"

Some translations (KJV, ASV) see the opening words as two titles ("Wonderful" and "Counsellor"), but the following three titles all have two elements. Also Wonderful (*pele*, פֶּלֶא) and Counsellor (*yo-ets*, יוֹעֵץ) are both used together elsewhere in Isaiah (25:1; 28:29), so it seems likely here also. The term "counsellor" could be taken in apposition to Wonder, so "a wonder as a counsellor" (eg. NAB "Wonder-Counselor") or with Wonder as the object, so "one who counsels wonders." But given the battle context for this child-son-king, it could have the sense of "wonderful or extraordinary Strategist" (see NET note 17 for full discussion).

JSB argues: "Semitic names often consist of sentences that describe God: thus the name Isaiah in Hebrew means 'The Lord saves' … names do not describe the person who holds them but the god whom the parents worship. Similarly, the name given to the child in this verse does not describe that child or attribute deity to him, contrary to classical Christian readings of this messianic verse." However, you have to wonder why this child in particular would be given a name many times longer than the average Hebrew name, especially when (contra *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz*, Isa 8:1, 3) it doesn't actually set out a sentence (in that case: 'one hurries to the plunder, one hurries to the loot') but, rather, it is just a list of titles. What exactly is so special here? The God being described, or the child, or both?

Also, although it is quite common to find participles in names in other languages like Akkadian, it's not so common in Hebrew (as here with 'the one counselling,' *Yo-etz*, יוֹעֵץ). Some obvious examples do actually describe their bearer, for example, Obed (עוֹבֵד) was a servant, Oded (עוֹדֵד) was a prophet/diviner (like his son) (2 Chr. 15), Doeg (דּוֹאֵג) was a worrier, etc. In other words, the morphology of those names suggests they describe their bearers in some way. So, when you come across a name like Yo-etz (יוֹעֵץ), it is reasonable to think that it describes its bearer.

It also seems reasonable to interpret the name Pele (פֶּלֶא) (not to be confused with that of the Brazillian footballer!) as a description of its bearer. Since we have names like Pelaiah (פְּלָאיָה) meaning "YAH does wonders," and since פֶּלֶא is natural to interpret as "a wonder" (i.e., the result of a wondrous work/miracle), the name Pele would also be natural to interpret as a description of its bearer (and unnatural to interpret as a description of God). In fact, names which are 'nouns' yet describe God in some way seem to be few and far between in the Hebrew Bible. By far the most common form is a verb attached to a divine name (e.g., Nathanel, Zebadiah), which can then be

shortened to the verb on its own (e.g., Nathan, Zabad). So the question becomes if Pele and Yo-etz both describe their bearer, is it not reasonable to take the others to do likewise?.[1]

The term "mighty God" could also be translated as "God [is] a warrior" or "God [is] mighty." Some argue this title portrays the king as God's representative on the battlefield, to fight against him is to fight against God. But the use of this title elsewhere suggests that Isaiah is arguing that this ideal Davidic king is Yahweh himself (see Is 10:21; Deut 10:17; Jer 32:18).

The term "everlasting father" is not to be read in a direct trinitarian sense, as the messianic king in this passage is the "son given." Here it seems to be a figurative, idiomatic use of father, picturing the king as the protector of his people (see Isa 22:21; Job 29:16), or as the *source* of everything (as in Job 38:28). The adjective "everlasting" here, for Isaiah and his readers, would probably be taken "as royal hyperbole emphasizing the king's long reign or enduring dynasty (for examples of such hyperbolic language used of the Davidic king, see 1 Kgs 1:31; Pss 21:4–6; 61:6–7; 72:5, 17). The New Testament indicates that the hyperbolic language (as in the case of the title "Mighty God") is literally realized in the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy, for Jesus will rule eternally" (see NET, note 19).

The title "Prince of Peace (*shalom*)" pictures the king as one who establishes a safe socio-economic environment for his people. It hardly depicts him as a meek individual, for he establishes peace through military strength (as the preceding context and the first two royal titles indicate). His people experience safety and prosperity because their invincible king destroys their enemies (NET, note 20). Alter adds: "The child who is born with wondrous qualities and who is to assume leadership is the ideal king who will be a stay against all enemies and establish an enduring reign of peace."

Then finally, "the zeal of the Lord" in this context refers to his intense devotion to, and love for, his people, which prompts him to vindicate them and to fulfil his promises to David and the nation (NET, note 26). Alter says the phrase "underscores an important theological point: such an ideal rule can come into being and sit on the throne of David only through God's zealous intervention."

Psalm 96. He comes. The psalm calls everyone to praise the Lord because he is both the majestic creator of the world and also the one who is righteous and true and is coming to judge all the inhabitants of the earth on that basis. The psalm is "decidedly global rather than national" (Alter). It is divided by the two calls to worship in verses 1 and 7.
Regarding details, the Hebrew word for salvation in verse 2 is, of course, the word *yeshua*, and verse 5 has a word-play – "for all the *e-lo-him* of the peoples are *e-li-lim*." *Elilim* means *worthless* and resonates with the plural word for *gods*, *elohim*. Alter translates it: "For all gods of the peoples are ungods" and explains: "Elilim is a polemic coinage that appears frequently elsewhere, punningly formed on *'al* (no, not) and *'el* (god), to which a diminutive or pejorative suffix is appended. The standard meaning of the term in all subsequent Hebrew is *idols* (Alter, 229).

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[1] Thanks to Cambridge scholar, James Bejon, for these insights from personal communication.

The psalmist calls all of nature to shout for joy before the Lord, because (notice the repetition) he comes, he comes …." The verb forms in the passage probably describe God's characteristic behaviour, though "he judges" could also be future, predicting future judgment of the people of the world (*tē-vel*). His judgment is always according to his *faithfulness*, or our modern word *integrity*—his judgment is always consistent with his character of righteousness. And "the rhetorical presence of other nations shows that God's glory is worldwide" (JSB). Human kings did not always mete out justice fairly. This psalm expresses a desire for an ideal, divine, royal judge. Reading this on Christmas day emphasises that the One who came at Christmas as a baby in a manger is also the One who will come a second time to judge all the peoples of the world.

Titus 2:11–14. The grace of God has appeared. This reading covers both appearings in a few verses. The first appearing in verse 11 refers to the grace of God appearing, bringing salvation to all peoples, and this is then expounded in verse 14. The second appearing is in verse 13, referring to our waiting for "our blessed hope and glorious appearing of the great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ." It is only right and proper for us to embrace both appearings at Christmas, to ensure we keep the end in view!

The terms "God and Saviour" both refer to the same person, Jesus Christ. This is one of the clearest statements in the NT concerning the deity of Christ. The construction in Greek is known as the Granville Sharp rule, named after the English philanthropist-linguist who first clearly articulated the rule in 1798. Sharp pointed out that in a construction where two nouns are singular, personal, and common (i.e., not proper names), they *always* have the same referent, in this case, Jesus Christ is God and Saviour (read NET, note 20).

The final verse is a glorious view of the purpose of the incarnation— "to set us free … and to purify for himself a people who are his very own, who are zealous to do good works"! This is the purpose of the grace of God appearing in the incarnation. JANT suggests this is "perhaps quoting from an early Christian hymn." The term "People of his own" means "chosen people" and occurs only here in the NT, but five times in LXX (Exod 19:5; 23:22; Deut 7:6; 14.2; 26:18; see also Ezek 37:23) to refer to Israel's election. Paul argues that this (predominantly Gentile) church in Crete should see itself in continuity with Israel (JANT).

Paul expounds the term "our Saviour, Jesus Christ" with a relative clause and a purpose clause. The relative clause says "who gave himself for us" and Paul here may be alluding to the Son of Man *logion* in Mark 10:45, where Jesus states why the Son of Man came: "to serve, and to give his life a ransom for all." Paul has used this explanation of Jesus' death in various contexts (Gal 1:4; 2:20; Eph 5:2; 1 Tim 2:6). In the purpose clause, Paul further expounds on the two-fold significance of Christ's death.
Firstly, there is the removal of believers from the sphere of sin by redemption, the freeing of a slave by the payment of a ransom. This concept of course comes from God's freeing of Israel, particularly in his deliverance from Egypt (Exod 6:6; Deut 7:8; 2 Sam 7:23). So, Christ's self-offering was to

redeem us from sin's enslavement, which is parallel with God's powerful intervention for Israel in the exodus. Notice the hostile environment from which we are redeemed, not from Egypt, but "from all iniquity/lawlessness." Referring to Psalm 129:8 LXX (130:8 Eng.), Paul changes Israel to "us," as the followers of the Messiah.

Secondly, he gave himself for us "to cleanse for himself a people of his own." This cleansing (*katharos*) linked to all iniquity (*anomia*) resonates with a series of LXX texts in Ezekiel 36–37 (36:25, 29, 33; 37:23), particularly Ezekiel 37:23. Also, in the phrase, "a people of his own" (*laos periousios*), Paul connects with Ezekiel again and the Mount Sinai texts (LXX: Ezek 36:28; 37:23; Exod 19:5; 23:22; Deut 7:6; 26:18). The term *periousios* only occurs here in the NT but also in the LXX of Exodus 19:5 and Deuteronomy 7:6. The term combines the ideas of unique possession and preciousness/costliness. It equates the election of Israel in the OT covenant passages with the believers in Yeshua Messiah in the NT. We also are "the people of God's special possession"!

Beale says: "Christ's purifying act is superimposed over God's act in the OT. The result is a people whose messianic identity is uniquely imprinted upon them … The historical event that marked this development [for God's people Israel] was the Exodus. Now, in the messianic age, the death of the Messiah replicates the exodus event and replaces it as the new historical benchmark; and it is the Messiah, who, acting in God's behalf, possesses this human treasure and imprints it with a renewed, unique identity" (Beale, 914). But this theology of becoming the new covenant people of God is combined with ethics, affecting behaviour—such people are also "zealous of good deeds."

Luke 2:1–20. Today, your Saviour is born to you. Our reading is made up of two stories, both of which emphasise the place where Jesus was born, in the city of David, in Bethlehem, in a manger (Gooding).

Spectacularly, Caesar Augustus, who was emperor from 27 BCE to 14 CE, did what had been predetermined by the counsel and foreknowledge of God! In the process of his human administrations, Augustus fulfilled what was prophesied by the prophet Micah, further proving Jesus' messianic claims. The term "City of David" usually refers to Jerusalem, but here it is being used to emphasise the Davidic connection and Jesus' connection to Bethlehem "his city" (1 Sam 20:6). Micah 5:2 prophesies of a ruler coming from Bethlehem.

It is important to clarify the meaning of the word usually translated as "inn." The Greek word *kataluma* (κατάλυμα) is flexible, and usage in the LXX and NT refers to a variety of places for lodging. However, it has been suggested by various scholars (Bailey, 1979, 2009; Carlson, 2010) that Joseph and Mary were staying with relatives in Bethlehem; if that were so, the term would refer to the guest room in the relatives' house (see only other NT references in Mk 14:14; Luke 22:11; where it means "the guest room"). Probably, the usual guest room was already full with relatives, so Mary had no space to have a private birth in a separate room, but gave birth in the common area. Stables, caves and inn-keepers are non-biblical embellishments! The humble nature of the birth is

emphasized by the fact that there was no special guest room or nursery for the child, and the only crib for the baby was an animal's feeding trough!

Luke may be using *manger* (*phatnē*) here as an allusion to Isaiah 1:3: "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib (*phatnē*), but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Certainly, Luke tells of some shepherds in Israel who came to see, know and understand who was in the manger (Luke 2:8–18), and his two-volume work (Luke-Acts) will go on to set out the "people of favour" (Luke 2:14) who would keep coming to know "peace on earth" because of this baby in a manger.

Beale explains that the term "firstborn" emphasised Jesus' unique status and role, more than his relative position to his siblings. The term recalls the stories of the patriarchs (Gen 25:25; 27:19, 32; 35:23; 38:6–7; 41:51; 46:8; 48:18) and focuses on the right of inheritance. It became a Christological title for the Messiah in the epistles (Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Heb 1:6; Rev 1:5).

Beale further connects this passage with our first reading: "Individual elements in this passage find their parallels in Isa 9:2–7 … light in the midst of darkness (2:8–9); Isa 9:2); joy (2:10; Isa 9:3); birth of a child (2:11; Isa 9:6); Davidic messiah (2:11; Isa 9:7); eschatological era of peace (2:14; Isa 9:6–7) … [and which will] involve the nations/Gentiles as they too will witness the glory of the Lord (2:10; Isa 9:11). Significantly, this message of the birth of a mighty ruler that ushers in an era of peace is situated in a chapter that opens with the mention of 'Emperor Augustus' (2:1)" (Beale, 267). Note the angel choir breaking into the darkness of earth's night to herald the long-awaited sunrise, reflecting Isaiah 9:1.
Also, the term "the glory of the Lord" is used frequently in the Hebrew scriptures, and signifies the presence of God himself (Exod 16:10; 24:16–17; 29:43; 40:34–35; Lev 9:6; Num 14:10; 16:19, 42; 20:6; 1 Kings 8:11; Ps 138:5; Isa 58:8; Ezek 1:28). And the term "Saviour" is usually applied to God alone in the Hebrew Scriptures (Deut 32:15; Ps 23:5; 24:5; Isa 12:2; 17:10; 45:15, 21; Hab 3:18), but here now it is applied to Jesus as the Davidic messiah. Note that Luke's use of this title may also be a reaction to the imperial propaganda that labels Augustus as the *sōtēr* of the world.

Christos Kurios, without a conjunction, is unique. Christos/Messiah refers to "the anointed one" and is used of kings (1 Sam 9:16; 24:6), priests (Lev 4:3, 5, 16) and prophets (1 Kings 19:16; Ps 105:15; Isa 61:1). The Apocryphal book, Psalms of Solomon, found in the LXX, describes the royal messianic figure in detail in chapter 17 and also contains this combination title (17:32).

Quoting Marshall, Beale says: "The use of the three titles 'Saviour, Messiah, Lord' brought out both the active and the passive connotations of Jesus' authority: the Saviour and Messiah is one who delivers God's people, while the Lord is the one who is to be obeyed and honoured."

Gooding gives a sensitive insight on Mary. He argues that no doubt she was concerned whether she was doing everything right, giving birth to this special child in a cramped public place and laying him in a manger! This must have been unspeakably distressing for Mary, yet according to the

shepherds, angels knew that the Son of God was lying in a manger! Humble shepherds could use it as a sign to guide them to where they might find the Saviour!

Uncounted millions since that time have been guided by the birth of this baby in a manger and have recognised him as God's Son and Saviour of the world, more than a birth in a palace would have done! Mary could be assured, all was well and would be well: the responsibility for shepherding the infant Son of God was in higher hands than hers!

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