

A Reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Hear, O shepherd of Israel, you that led Joseph like a flock; shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim, before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your mighty strength and come to our salvation. Turn us again, O God; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry at your people's prayer? You feed them with the bread of tears; you give them abundance of tears to drink. You have made us the derision of our neighbours and our enemies laugh us to scorn. Turn us again, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You made room around it, and when it had taken root, it filled the land. The hills were covered with its shadow and the cedars of God by its boughs.



It stretched out its branches to the Sea and its tendrils to the River. Why then have you broken down its wall, so that all who pass by pluck off its grapes? The wild boar out of the wood tears it off, and all the insects of the field devour it.

Turn again, O God of hosts, look down from heaven and behold; cherish this vine which your right hand has planted, and the branch that you have made so strong for yourself. Let those who burnt it with fire, who cut it down, perish at the rebuke of your countenance.

Let your hand be upon the man at your right hand, the son of man you made so strong for yourself. And so will we not go back from you; give us life, and we shall call upon your name. Turn us again, O Lord God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

Psalm 80

The Prophet Isaiah foresees a time when what is broken and distorted will be repaired and made good. It is right at the heart of the Advent hope:

A shoot will come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of

wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

Isaiah 11.1-3

We have already considered how these sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit represent the fulfilment of our Advent hope – wisdom and insight, prudence and moral strength, genuine perception, and wonder and awe before the Face of God. This is the promise of Pentecost too, the bestowal upon the whole creation of the powers of *renewal*.

We pray for the renewal of what is *broken*. It is easy to blame God for the flaws in the creation, as if he had designed things inadequately and he is responsible for what is distorted. But the *Book of Genesis* records how the damage worked its way into and through God's *good* creation because of the mixture of wilfulness and weakness in the human soul. We are the ones who have spoilt God's creation; God, on the other hand, is our *witness*. In the Biblical account of the world, it is this which makes our relationship with God so fraught: we long to evade our own accountability and shift the blame; but God has seen the unpleasant truth of the matter. There is no escape, except by means of what the Bible calls *repentance* – the turning of our hearts and minds *back to God*, which is at the heart of the call of the prophets. It is why the motto of Advent is 'prepare the way of the Lord' (Isaiah 40.3, quoted again by John the Baptist in Matthew 3.3).

Psalm 80, which is given to us on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, draws all these themes together, with its lament at the state of a vine – an image of the creation as a whole – once abundant with fruit but now untended and withered. The Psalmist knows that we are the ones who have neglected the vine. He understands that just judgement is fitting for those who have neglected proper care for the goods of God. At the same time he exhorts God to return to us as we return also to him; that we may *start again*.

As our guide and strength comes the 'countenance of God', called upon as a refrain which punctuates the Psalm: 'Turn us again, O God; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.' Here is the 'great light', which shines on the people who walked in darkness (Isaiah 9.2) – the light which 'shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it' (John 1.5), Jesus Christ himself, the 'light of the world' (John 8.12). As we reorient ourselves towards the Word of God, may that light be our delight, our hope, our sustenance and our guide, and our joy.