

## ROOTS, STUMPS, SHOOTS AND SURPRISES

Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3: 1-13

Roots, stumps and shoots, they appear in both of our readings today. John talks to the people about God's servant coming to lay an axe at the root of the trees, to cut down, make a stump, of all which do not bear fruit. And so the people are warned that God comes with more than a warm fuzzy feeling. He comes to see things change, to make things change, and people who will not change and bear fruit will have no place in his purposes.

Isaiah talks of the old Kingly line of Israel as being like a tree stump. It is still there but it isn't what it was when it was fully grown and glorious. Now it can only remind people of the past.

There is a new tree stump at the gates of Heriot Kirk. An old elm, which was dying and dangerous, has been cut down. It had to go, its day was past, but no one could call the stump beautiful, or useful. All it does is sit there reminding us of how once there was a majestic tree gracing that part of the Kirkyard.

There is another stump in the Kirkyard, one on the left half way up the drive. Its tree was cut down some time ago, and left a hollow stump, for the tree had been rotten. And a couple of years ago the Somerville family decided to plant some flowers in that hollow stump, so that now it has become a little garden. It's nice that we can make the best of what is left, but the tree itself will never grow again. The roots, which are left, will never again fulfil their purpose of giving life and growth to a tree.

John says that those who do not produce God's fruit in their lives, those who don't show by their lives that they belong to God, will be cut down to become like stumps. Isaiah says that the old Kingly line has been cut down to become a memorial stump. Sometimes people think that the church has lost its way or lost its relevance in the post-modern world in which we live. It has, they think, become a bit like a useless old stump.

But look closely, because Isaiah says that if you do you will be surprised. The lifeless old stump can still produce a shoot! The old royal line can still produce an heir, and what an heir. He will triumph over the apparent deadness of the stump because God's Spirit is on him. He will rewrite the rules for being a ruler, because his delight is in the fear of the Lord.

Isaiah gives us a pretty good idea of what people expected from their rulers by emphasising what this ruler, this shoot of the stump will not do. He will not judge by what his eye sees - in other words he will not be open to bribes, giving his support to the one who can show him the most. And he will not decide by what his ear hears - he won't be susceptible to propaganda. Such favouritism and self-centeredness is what people expected of their rulers. But the shoot of the stump will be on the side of the poor, and be fair to those who are meek, who do not make a noise and demand things. And his insistence upon justice will be like death for the wicked.

What a surprise his coming will be! They had thought that God had abandoned the house of David, but what God has chosen, he has chosen, and he will not let it go. He will give a shoot, he will do a new thing from an old source, and everything - even the realm of nature, will know the change and the blessing. Isaiah heralds this as the good news that it is, but he is aware that for those who thought that any shoot would be just like what had been before, those who looked forward to power and privilege, this might not be news that seemed so good. When God's Spirit

raises up a shoot, it won't be what anyone expects. It will be better.

John gets a surprise as well. John is brought up knowing that his is to be a prophetic role, that he is to be the herald of God's coming Messiah. You may be sure that his parents would tell him over and over the story which we find in Luke's gospel, about how his birth was announced by no less than an angel. Naturally he would be interested to discover what the long-vanished prophets of the past had done and said. And so when he starts his task, he dresses in the rough and ready way of an Elijah, which gains him a ready hearing. This is something which has not been seen for a long time. Then he proclaims the preparatory message of Isaiah - a message the people had lived with for many years, ever since it was first written into their Scriptures.

They had heard it before, but now they listen with new ears. Now it is not being proclaimed in the synagogues, politely, on the Sabbath, part of their religious duty. Now it is being proclaimed in the streets and the fields, and especially in the desert. Now going to hear it becomes an event. And suddenly there is hope. The people might have thought that God had abandoned the house of Israel, but what God has chosen, he has chosen, and he will not let it go. He will send his Messiah.

John gives Jesus a tremendous build up. He prepares people for a Messiah who will demand righteousness and repentance, he baptises them showing that when the Messiah comes it is a complete new start - just like the people leaving slavery in Egypt and crossing the Jordan to the Promised Land. He warns that God can't be compelled by the cosy assurance that these are the children of Abraham. He is coming and he wants change, he wants justice, and for those who refuse to change it will not be good news.

The build up that John gives Jesus is like an impresario coming on stage to give a big build up to the main act. This is going to be the greatest musician in the world, he says. What he does with music you will never have heard before. He will take the orchestra and make it sing with majesty and wonder. And here he is - the master!

And then Jesus came from Galilee to John and the Jordan to be baptised by him. John gets the biggest surprise of his life. It is as if following the big build up what happens is that a slight, casually dressed young man comes on stage, smiles, and produces a simple penny whistle from his pocket. And the impresario wonders, can this be the great musician? He plays a simple tune, with none of the bombast you might have expected from the build up. It is simple but beautiful and irresistible. The audience catches its breath. Then the orchestra begins to take up the tune, weaving it through variations and transpositions, until indeed it is singing with majesty and wonder. And all you had ever thought about music is turned upside down and rewritten.

Jesus came, and although in time all that John has said of him and his ministry and his expectations is absolutely true, he begins very simply by identifying himself with the ordinary people and asking that the new beginning be marked with his baptism as well. John was surprised at the time, later he was to send and ask if Jesus really was the one who God had sent or should they look for someone else. Jesus wasn't what was expected. That was his strength. That still is his strength.

The stump has grown a shoot, but what a surprise he turns out to be.

There is a stump at the gate of Heriot Kirkyard, useless ugly, relevant only as a reminder of the past. Many people think of the church that way. Even in this coming

season of Christmas, when more people than usual will come through the door of the churches and attend services of worship, even then, many do so only as a nostalgic look back. They come expecting the familiar, some even get cross if they get a surprise. Even some who believe in God and who follow Christ think that God has abandoned the church, but God has chosen the gathered people of Christ as his own in the world, and what God has chosen, he has chosen, and he will not let it go.

So now, when we announce the coming of the King, now when we announce the coming of the Messiah, now when we prepare to welcome Jesus is the time to look for new growth. Look carefully. When God sends a shoot from a stump it never looks just as we might expect.

Maybe to find where Christ is working in our midst we need to look at the children. Maybe we need to look at the elderly of our community. Maybe we need to look to those who are on the fringes of the church community. Christ comes as King and he comes as the promised Saviour - and he takes these concepts and reinterprets them and makes more of them than we can ever imagine. He comes as King - asking to be enthroned as King of our lives before we can see him as King of the universe. He comes as Saviour, and saves all creation as well as each one of us. His working is both greater and smaller than we expect.

The message of John, that we prepare the way of the Lord is still one to which we must listen. The joy of Isaiah that God's people and God's plans have not been abandoned nor defeated is a joy in which we can share. And the expectation of both of these prophets is an expectation in which we can share - always remembering that if we expect God's Son then we can expect to be surprised.