

## ***A Little Child Shall Lead Them***

By Dr. Dave Neale

### **Behind the Text**

We could say so much about this iconic Christmas passage!

Let's begin with a few words about its place in the overarching narrative of Scripture. You recall that David was Israel's second king 1000 years before Jesus, the original "shoot of Jesse."

This passage is from so-called First Isaiah, dates from the time of the Assyrian occupation of Northern Israel in the early eighth century BCE. Isaiah writes 200 years after David.

This thread of God's promise to David that an heir would sit on his throne forever, reappears 800 years later with the advent of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>1</sup>

Christians have always taken this as a messianic text because of verse 1 and 10.

### **In the Text**

***A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots (v 1) ... On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples (v 10).***<sup>2</sup>

Here is a somewhat obscure sidebar: "There is a similarity in sound and possibly in meaning between" the Hebrew word for "branch" (נֶצֶחַ, *ntsr*, Isa 11:1) and the Greek for *Nazareth* (Ναζαρετ, *Nazaret*; Oxford Study Bible, p. 4).<sup>3</sup>

And so, when we read in Matthew 2:23 this: ***There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."***<sup>4</sup>

In other words, he will be called the "Branch."

In between verses 1 and 10, this parentheses of the stump and root of Jesse, there is a vision of a world where wisdom and understanding abound! There will be no Twitter.

..where the knowledge of the Lord is all-pervasive. No hate speech, no misinformation, only one truth.

This tender young shoot will rescue the poor, will be guided by righteousness. And above all, an unimaginable peace will settle upon creation once again. Eden recovered.

***The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them (v 6).***



*The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* tells me that there are more than 500 biblical texts about children. The Bible has a lot to say on the subject. But only half of those statements are literal. ***Do not withhold discipline from a child or, a child left to himself brings shame*** (Prov 23:13, 29:15).

Yes, children are often frustratingly immature. Humans have the longest period of immaturity of any animal – 15 years before independence. ***Folly is bound up in the heart of a child*** (Prov 22:15).

The other half of those references to children are figurative/metaphorical. That is, the idea of childhood is used as a metaphor for the broader human experience. Says Paul in 1 Cor 13:

***When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways*** (v 11).

Here childishness is a metaphor for adult immaturity.

But often the child is a symbol of God's presence among us. ***Like a child that is quieted is my soul...*** (Ps 131:2).

In the beatific vision of our passage, it is the ***child who will lead them***. Often in Scripture, the spirit of the child is held out as the example of those whose innocence and openness to God makes them closest to God. They live in an Eden of sorts, a prelapsarian state. The Word of the Day: "occurring before the Fall; characteristic of any innocent or care free period."

Kids sometimes just show a tendency to know and understand the presence of God, innately.

## From the Text

I have a memory of a conversation with my mother when I was a boy of 6 or 7 (it's quite clear - I even remember where we were in the house). I remember saying to my mom, "I just think it is so evident that there is a God!" I remember being able to just feel that. The reality is that we lose this as the years go by.

Why? In the discussion of what is consciousness, psychologists say that the way the adult mind manages the complexities of life is through its preconceptions of life already lived, by the rigours of rational thought we have to apply to our life to remain productive, and by the habits of thought that become ever more fixed as our lives go on. Our consciousness becomes bounded by a complex set of mental habits. The older we get the harder it is to change our minds about anything.

That is a blessing in one respect, otherwise we are overwhelmed in the chaos of life. But it also has a negative aspect.

"The most formidable disincentive to major religious change is always our social formation."<sup>5</sup>

By the time we are in our later years our ability to dream of what might be, to range laterally across seemingly unconnected ideas is very much diminished.

$E=mc^2$  is the most famous example of lateral thought, but even Einstein lost that ability to some extent as the years went by, or so they say. We come to always say, "Yes, but..." We know what life is and we know how what we need to do to get through it.

But Eden is lost along the way. Our innocence, our sense of wonder can decamp. And our sense of God is lost and constrained. We become closed to the *mysterium tremendum; the awe inspiring mystery of life, the numinous and awesome Presence*. The awe of God is lost.

Back to Isaiah 11. It isn't the *grown sheep* but the *lamb* that dwells with the wolf. It isn't the *goat* that shall lie down with the leopard but the *kid*. It isn't the *cow* with the lion, but the *calf and the fatling*.

[Musicians come]

It isn't an adult who shall lead us, but a child. Jesus comes to us as a child and our innocence is regained, we return to Eden. Oh! how we long for Eden. ***For a child has been born for us, a son given to us and he is named Prince of Peace*** (Isaiah 9:6). A child ushers us back into the Garden.

We also have our part to play, because Jesus of Nazareth said the *essential quality* for entering the kingdom is childlikeness.<sup>6</sup>

***Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it*** (Mark 10:14-15//Matt//Luke).

It is not just from the *child* Jesus that the seed of salvation grows – but from the child within us. Maybe this is why we are so nostalgic at Christmas, yearning to regain the wonder of the season we knew as a child. But I don't think that is what Jesus was talking about.

John has a somewhat different, and interesting way of expressing the same thought:

***"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew (from above), he cannot see the kingdom of God"*** (John 3:3).

Remove the negatives and we have this positively stated: ***If you are born anew you will see the kingdom of God.*** If you become like a child you will enter the kingdom of God.

There is no shortcut. You've just got to lay it all down and come to God as a child.

Paul put it this way, ***So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; everything has become new*** (2 Cor 5:17).

And therein lies the hope of Advent.

Come to the Lord's Table

Benediction: And now may the Lord who bids us become as children in His Presence, give you the joy of the knowledge God in the week to come, and may the old ways be subsumed by a bright new creation. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

<sup>1</sup> We recall that David, the second king of Israel, was plucked by the prophet Samuel from the eight sons of Jesse in Bethlehem to be anointed king over Israel in the place of the fallen Saul (see 2 Samuel 7).

<sup>2</sup> There are 16x allusions in the NT to Isaiah 11:1-10. The references all run to the origination of the shoot of Jesse. Mt 2:23, Acts 13:23; Heb 7:13 (*it is evident our Lord is descended from Judah... nothing about priests*); Rev 5:5, *Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered...*; Rev 21:16 Jesus says of himself, *I am the root and the descendent of David, the bright morning star.*

<sup>3</sup> By the way, archaeologists believe the Nazareth of Jesus day was about 60 acres in size, mostly empty land; a very small village with less than 500 inhabitants.

<sup>4</sup> This seems to be a quote Judges 13:5, 7 in reference to Samson, who will be raised as a Nazarite, one who abstains from alcohol. It is known to be a pretty round-about, problematic reference.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 141.