

Hebrews 10:5-10 – Knowing and submitting to the Lord is true worship

The priesthood of the Old Covenant, with its elaborate ceremonial and sacrifices, is now replaced by Jesus

5-6 Therefore, when Christ came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You prepared for Me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings You were not pleased."

"With... offerings You were not pleased" – a quotation from the Greek version of David's Psalm 40, about simple submissive obedience to God's will being the superior replacement, which God far prefers to the sacrifices of Mosaic Law.

7 Then I said, "Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, my God."

8 First He said, 'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did

not desire, nor were you pleased with them' – though they were offered in accordance with the law.

"Offerings you did not desire" – the ceremonial system was a stop-gap measure until Jesus should come and die, once, as a final sacrifice for sins. The writer implies that God never liked the previous complex and superficial means of holiness.

9 Then He said, 'Here I am, I have come to do your will.' He sets aside the first to establish the second.

"The first... the second" – Jesus' perfect sacrifice of Himself sets aside for all time all previous sacrifices as a means of sinners being made holy.

10 And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

IN PRACTICE God is holy, and He seeks holiness in those who are His. The change which is this week's theme, is in how we see the path to holiness. We have two options: the first, to be transformed by inviting Jesus to be lord of our lives as the One who has offered us salvation in Him – a new identity, revealed by His Spirit and centred on receiving new life in the basis of what He has done for us. Option 2 is that we try to achieve holiness by whatever means of ceremonial and modern sacrifice we can devise, in a church setting that mimics the Temple and its worship. This presents itself as an easier path – we can rely on a modern day priestly figure to do most of the work for us – but, as this passage and Psalm 49 makes clear, it doesn't work and it ignores God's good intentions for us. This Advent, get back to what pleases God – our simple, dependent obedience, relying on Jesus and our relationship with Him.

QUESTION *Why do we complicate things? Is it an easier path to follow, or ultimately a harder path that doesn't find the destination?*

PRAYER Lord, we are creatures of routine and habit and look for security in what is familiar when we should find our security in You. Help us to accommodate change, and to be willing to be changed, as we worship You in the Spirit and in the truth of who Jesus is, the only name under heaven by whom we can be saved, and in whom we come to You in prayer. Amen.

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The Bible readings for Sunday, Dec. 23, 2018, with commentary notes

Revised Common Lectionary readings for **Sunday, December 23**, in Bible order

Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme: **Advent ABCD - Defer to the Lordship of Christ**

Psalm 80:1-7 (theme introduction) – A plea for a change in God's heart

Micah 5:2-5a – A great ruler will emerge from humble origins

Luke 1:39-55 – Elizabeth's unborn baby defers to the Messiah

Hebrews 10:5-10 – Knowing and submitting to the Lord is true worship

SUMMARY *From an insignificant place will arise a great shepherd of ancient origins and worldwide majesty. Elizabeth's unborn baby leaps in the womb as she meets Mary, who is carrying Jesus. In the words of Mary's song, God scatters those who don't defer to Him while raising up those who do, in fulfilling His promises.*

Psalm 80:1-7 – A plea for a change in God's heart

A lament from the time of the fall of the northern kingdom, 150 years before the fall of Judah and Jerusalem.

1-2 Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken Your might; come and save us.

"Between the cherubim" – in the most holy place, the top of the ark of the covenant formed a 'mercy seat' with two cherub forms in gold on either side, symbolising the throne of God and therefore His presence.

"Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh" – northern tribes. "Joseph" represents all the tribes.

3 Restore us, O God; make Your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

4 How long, Lord God Almighty, will your anger smoulder against the prayers of your people?

"Your anger... against the prayers" – some prayers, clearly, can provoke God's anger, and the plea for a change of heart recognises this. The question is, what attitude underlying the prayers is so offensive?

5 You have fed them with the bread of tears; You have made them drink tears by the bowlful.

6 You have made us an object of derision to our neighbours, and our enemies mock us.

"Object of derision" – for the Lord to have allowed Gentiles to prevail over them

7 Restore us, God Almighty; make Your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

A prayer for a change to know God's favour again, in the context of a change of heart and repentant spirit.

Micah 5:2-5a – A great ruler will emerge from humble origins

The whole earth will defer to this great Shepherd of God's peace

One of the most significant prophecies about the coming of Messiah, this makes the connection with King David, born in the same Ephrathah region.

2 'But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for Me One who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.'

"Ephrathah" – the district where Bethlehem ('house of bread') is located, and where David was born, 1 Samuel 17:12. As the youngest son of Jesse, he was not originally included to appear under the prophetic scrutiny of Samuel, 1 Sam. 16:10-13. David was an unlikely choice as king; Bethlehem was an unlikely home town for a subsequent and greater David, but some scholars of Jesus' time did see in this prophecy Bethlehem associated with the Messiah.

3 Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labour

IN PRACTICE The need for personal, repentant change in preparing for an encounter with the Lord has been an emphasis of previous week's. Now it's about being prepared to change – to accommodate the unexpected ways of God's order. Corrupt spiritual leadership, Micah 3:9-11, and its consequences – Micah lived at the time the northern kingdom fell to Assyrian attackers in 722 BC – is contrasted with God's constant heart to restore and bring people back to Himself, all through the Book of Micah. When God moves in restoration the demand in us to change our mindset is the greatest. God is good all the time, but we have to trust Him to allow His goodness to be realised.

QUESTION *What do we have to do to experience God's desire to be our peace?*

Luke 1:39-55 – Elizabeth's unborn baby defers to the Messiah

As Elizabeth and Mary meet, the Holy Spirit is a strong presence with them

39-40 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

"Hill country of Judea" – A four-day journey.

bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.

"Abandoned" – the nation was without a king from the exile in the sixth century BC onwards.

"When she... bears a son" – can be interpreted as Mary, the mother of Jesus; or Bethlehem bearing a son; or a son born of the righteous remnant; or (taking the whole verse) the end time deliverance of those able to participate joyfully in the coming of the fullness of the kingdom, Micah 4:9-5:1.

4 He will stand and shepherd His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God. And they will live securely, for then His greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

"Shepherd His flock" – meaning rule a nation.

5 And He will be our peace.

"Our peace" – shalom is a broad term of general well-being and prosperity, but the context, Micah 5:5-7, emphasises peace from Israel's enemies symbolised by Assyrian invaders.

41-42 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!

"The baby leaped" – a remarkable response which

the Holy Spirit caused. The baby John leaping in the womb recognises he is in the presence of someone greater; Jesus is not just a prophet. John is already announcing the coming of the Messiah.

43-45 But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!

"Leaped for joy" – Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit, has prophetic insight about the baby within her expressing joy.

46 And Mary said:

The words that follow are Mary's Psalm-like song of praise commonly called (from Latin) the Magnificat, which means 'glorifies'.

47-48 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant.

49 From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name.

"Humble state... all... will call me blessed – at a stroke Mary has changed from a poor Hebrew girl in humble circumstances, to a path that will make her the most honoured woman the world has known.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear

Him, from generation to generation.

51-53 He has performed mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

"He has performed" – Mary's experience of change is set in greater and wider change, in which the expected order is turned upside down, and the ones favoured by God's mercy are simply those who turn to Him without any merit of their own. God is 'performing' this.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.

"Brought down... lifted up" God's reversal of the expected order, an emphasis of Luke and Acts. Jewish culture generally saw power and wealth as evidence of God's favour, and questioned why someone of humble state should be chosen. Mary is part of this reversal which anticipates the reversal to come at Jesus' coming at the end time.

54-55 He has helped His servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, just as He promised our ancestors.'

"Remembering... just as He promised" – Mary is aware of the enduring force of God's covenant promises. The angel Gabriel who appeared to Mary spoke of God's covenant with David, Luke 1:32-33, 2 Samuel 7:13, 16, and here Mary recalls the older covenant with Abraham, Gen. 12:1-3, 17:3-8.

IN PRACTICE Like the Jews of Jesus' time, we naturally think of God's favour resting on people who, in our judgment, have merit. The problem is the value we put on our judgments about people. We forget that God looks on the heart. He places high value on those who have dealt with their pride and self-sufficiency to 'fear' Him as His humble, dependent and genuinely loving worshippers. Hence the huge responsibility assigned to Mary and Joseph. The challenge to change for us, is that God finds it easier to use us, when we have taken off our medals and badges of rank.

QUESTION *What worldly honours or positions do we need resign from, prayerfully and perhaps practically, to be eligible for God's next assignment?*