

The stump and the shoot.

It's the second Sunday of Advent, when we prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ at Christmas, and for the second week running we are directed to one of the great prophecies associated with the season. Like last week, the prophecy is attributed to Isaiah of Jerusalem and it picks up one of the great Advent themes – the promise of One who is to come to rule the world. And the passage depicts beautifully this coming one and what his rule will look like, for he is bathed in the Spirit of God, and he will bring peace and justice and rest to a torn and weary world.

Such thoughts, however, raise a pressing question about the here and now – namely, who rules the world today? Whose power and authority do we actually experience this Sunday morning in Advent 2016? What are the forces and instruments of power that govern and shape our world and the lives of each of us here? And I am prompted to consider this question by a recently published book called, appropriately enough, 'Who Rules the World?' and written by one of the foremost intellectuals of our day, Noam Chomsky. Now, if you are familiar with Chomsky you will know that he is nothing if not controversial and he provokes strong reactions. Yet we cannot ignore him and his views have to at least be heard. Chomsky is American and it's no surprise that his first candidate for who rules the world is the USA.

Just over a week ago the ex-leader of Cuba, Fidel Castro died and people of my generation and older were reminded of the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962 when the USA and the USSR stood eyeball to eyeball and it really seemed possible that they would drag the entire world down with them into an unimaginable nuclear conflagration. Behind that stand-off there lurked the question, 'Who Rules the World?' with each of those superpowers vying for supremacy. And the end of the Cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union has left the USA as the world's one true superpower, even while Mr Putin flexes his muscles. And that gives the USA enormous influence for good or for ill (Chomsky would major on the ill) – even if America's influence has waned in recent decades. And who knows exactly how that influence will be exercised under its new president? How interesting though to discover this week that the combined wealth of the new administration's Cabinet is the largest in history. The Cabinet is not yet complete but already the combined wealth of its

members surpasses the annual gross domestic product of around 50 small countries. And we can't help but wonder how that might affect the Administration's policies and whose interest will be served, especially in the light of all the campaign rhetoric about concern for the disenfranchised and the left behind.

That brings me, however, to another answer to the question, 'who rules the world'. Besides the USA Chomsky also refers to what the eighteenth century Scottish economist Adam Smith referred to as 'the masters of mankind'. And who are 'the masters of mankind'? Well, for Adam Smith they referred to the financial powers of the then dominant empire of the day, Great Britain – the merchants, the manufacturers, the landowners. And as Chomsky points out, Smith's masters of mankind of have been replaced today by multinational conglomerates, huge financial institutions, retail empires and the like. They rule the modern world. And of the masters of mankind of his day Smith had this to say, 'All for ourselves and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind'. And we might argue whether that is a fair description of their successors today. Do the masters serve only themselves and small elites or do they serve the common good? For we are talking here about what the Bible calls mammon, the power of money and wealth and consumption and mammon is a power that must be handled with great care. We must not be ruled by it – it must serve the interests of all, especially the vulnerable.

So, if Chomsky is right, as we draw to the conclusion of this year, 2016, the primary answer to the question 'who rules the world?' is the USA and mammon. As the year ends we must surely ask how that rule looks. How is the world is faring at the end of this 2016th year of our Lord? How are we shaping up? Well, I don't need to spell it out – we know how the world looks this Advent. And it was brought home to me so powerfully this week by two news items that happened to hit me one after another. The first was the item about the Trump cabinet that I've already referred to. With less than half the posts filled their combined wealth stands at \$11 billion. Right after that I saw the item about the up to 120,000 people facing starvation in Northern Nigeria as a result of the Boko Haram Islamist insurgency – little babies and children who had not eaten for days, skin taut over their skeletal bodies like parchment. And somehow the juxtaposition of these two items spoke volumes of our dysfunctional and unjust world, one which lives by the survival of the fittest,

where conflicts are fueled by imperial interests and where children and the vulnerable cry for food to fill their swollen bellies.

So we return to our passage, this prophecy of Isaiah's, and to the depiction of the one who is coming to rule. And given the state of the world this Advent morning there is much here in which to bathe our eyes. Here is one who, we are told, comes to 'judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth'. Here is one under whose rule the wolf lives with the lamb and the leopard lies down with the kid and a child shall lead them. In other words this is no longer a world ruled by and for Smith's 'masters of mankind'. And this is not a world where the fittest fight for dominance. And this is not a world ruled by one superpower with its billionaire, gilded government. No, this is a world where children play in safety, and nature is at peace, and 'they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain'.

There's one feature, however, of this vision that I want to focus on particularly. This ruler, we are told in verse 1, shall come as a shoot from the stump of Jesse – as a shoot from the line of King David whose father was Jesse. So a shoot shall come from a stump, and a stump is something that has been cut off, cut down. And the previous chapter of Isaiah ends with a frightening picture of destruction, of an axe cutting down trees with terrifying power, leaving mutilated stumps in their wake. And the reference is probably to a terrifying assault by the then superpower of Assyria upon Israel's Southern Kingdom with its capital city of Jerusalem in the 8th century BC. The result was the kind of devastation familiar to those who have endured the assaults of Boko Haram, or those holed up in the ruins of Aleppo. Stumps. Buildings that were once homes reduced to sumps. Bodies once graceful and dignified as trees – many children – cut down. Stumps.

Yet listen again to the prophecy: 'a shoot shall come forth from the stump...' From that stump comes forth this ruler – new life out of ruin and destruction. And this ruler's reign will be characterized this way - by shoots, new life, blooming out of death and destruction. Indeed, in a later fulfillment of this prophecy, new life will blossom from the stump of a tree from which his body hangs. And there goes dear John the Baptist in our reading from Matthew's Gospel, using the same imagery for his message of judgement: 'the axe is lying at the root of the trees and every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.' But dear John, so inflamed with

judgement and fire, you've forgotten that out of the stumps left behind by the axe there come shoots of new life.

Who rules the world? America? Mammon? What else? At advent we look beyond those to this one, prophesied by Isaiah, who has come. For his rule, imagine not conventional power but rather a stump, cut down, cut short by an axe. Think of all the ways that image fits our world. Think of how it might fit your life. And then picture shoots, green shoots of new life, blossoming. This is how he comes. Amen.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Dear Father in Heaven,

We thank you for the history of this church – for Pastor Lance and his Consistory and all those who help to ensure that we can be here today to share in Fellowship and to listen to Your Word.

Lord, thank You for the busy days of Advent. The days and weeks leading to the whole world's reminder of the birth of Your Son. Jesus Christ. Our Saviour.

Inspire us Lord to reflect Your Grace and Love - may Your Blessings reach all of Your people.

Right here in this City - in this Country and in the World - Traversing the highest mountains and reaching across all the seas.

Heavenly Father – At this time we especially think of Mulanje Mission Hospital - we cannot help being reminded of a poor land-locked country, with a very beautiful mountain.

Bless our event this week, and as we prepare we thank you for this opportunity to participate in improving conditions that the hospital.

Encourage us all to pray for Ruth Shakespeare and her staff who take care of the poorest of the poor in your world.

We thank you Lord for all who those work to heal and serve their fellow-man.

This week as families in the Benelux countries celebrate Sinterklaas – we thank You for our freedom to celebrate – Thank You for the gift of generosity. And thank You for people who take care of children and we ask especially for Your Blessing on them.

In Your Holy Name we pray,

Amen