Who is the One?

When we conjure up in our minds images of the kings of long ago, a common idea is that they had things pretty much their own way, living in splendour with no one to challenge them. But certainly 800 or so years before Christ, there lived a king who was very conscious of the fact that it wasn't all fun being a king! His name is Ahaz and we hear of him in the book of Isaiah the Prophet. He had a real problem, in that his kingdom was under threat by imminent invasion and the advice he was receiving was conflicting! His own inclination was to strengthen his army, and make alliances with some foreign countries whom he didn't really like but whom he thought might help him against the threat of invasion.

However, opposing advice came from the man we know as Isaiah, who warned Ahaz that those whom he was seeking to make alliance with could in fact turn against him. Isaiah urged the king to put his trust in God, to *"remember the covenant this people has with God, in which God promises to protect us and provide for us"*. But Ahaz persisted in trusting his political alliances, and as a result, his Kingdom - Judah - was attacked not only by one but by a whole host of countries: Syria to the north, Edom and Philistia to the south. Faced with this disaster, Ahaz then tried to buy in favour with the most powerful of countries—by offering the king of Assyria some of the precious treasury from the Temple.

Isaiah was appalled by the whole thing. He saw no hope in Ahaz and looked to the next generation and encouraged his contemporaries with the hope that security and peace would be realised by a king yet to be born (Hezekiah). In that *"shoot from the stock of Jesse"* (the first verse of this Sunday's first reading) there was more hope. Hezekiah was a good king who surpassed his father in exemplifying the gifts of the Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, awe of the Lord) - see again this Sunday's first reading. But even Hezekiah was not the king to bring that peace and security for which God's people longed. That king was still to come.

Eventually Isaiah would give the promise that the Prince of Peace would be born of the virgin. Even as the reading from Isaiah is proclaimed this Sunday we see its perfect fulfilment in the person of Jesus. Through him we still cherish the hopes of peace and justice. The centuries which have passed since eighth century BC Isaiah, with the coming and goings of kings, and kingdoms, rulers and leaders, people have placed their hopes, asking *Is this the person in whom our hopes will be fulfilled?* Every strategy has been tried: we rejoice in democracy but there have been kings, dictators, military coups and the many "isms" like capitalism and communism . Yet the question remains, as the prophet poetically describes in today's reading: *Who will lead us to the new age of innocence, reconciliation, truth and gentleness?* Who is the One who can restore our world in such a way that the fragile, the fainthearted and vulnerable will be cared for and respected? Who can lift us up in expectant hope of the true future, and in the present moment, what instrument do I have to be able to foster healing, grace and dignity?

These hopes and expectations have lived in human hearts through the centuries. We continue to gasp and cling to them. As Advent will give away to Christmas, on that most sacred of nights we shall sing of Bethlehem, that *"the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee, tonight"*. Isaiah paints a vivid word-picture which continues to sustain us: the image of the little boy bringing the wolf and the lamb together in peace.

Now he comes — the King whose coming and whose reign we know — Jesus. The bridgebuilder, John the Baptist, brought the Old Testament witness to completion and opened the way for the coming of the true Redeemer. In his spirit, we sometimes sing that *God's Spirit is in our heart* also. Of course we still await the complete realisation of Christ's Kingdom, but like Simeon, *our eyes have seen salvation*: we have experienced the life of the divine one in our sacramental celebrations: we open our minds and hearts to the power of his word every Sunday . We cry out for its fulfilment in this season and throughout the liturgical year—*Come, Lord Jesus!*