

I've recently spent quite a lot of time in libraries looking at various mediaeval manuscripts. They were all hand-written by monks and professional scribes, and many of them are beautifully illuminated; nothing quite as glorious as the Book of Kells or the Lindisfarne Gospels, but not far behind. One particularly interesting variety of manuscript is the Psalter. This contains all the psalms, with a calendar at the front listing festivals and saints' days, and a bunch of canticles (such as the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis) at the back. The page facing the beginning of Psalm 1 often has particularly splendid decorations – always on the left-hand side of the book when opened, with Psalm 1 on the right.

This is the place, if it occurs at all, for what is called a 'Tree of Jesse' – a pictorial representation of the descent of Jesus from David. You sometimes see this illustrated in mediaeval stained glass, as well as in psalters. David was the son of Jesse. You may remember the story of how God sent Samuel to select one of the sons of Jesse to be king instead of Saul. Jesse paraded seven of his sons, but God – through Samuel – said that none of them would do. Samuel asked if there were any more sons and Jesse said yes; his youngest, David, was away looking after his sheep. This tree of Jesse shows Jesus' lineage, and it seemed entirely appropriate to the monks and scribes to put it at the beginning of the psalms which David had composed.

Sometimes a psalter has an interesting addition to this page. You had to be very rich to commission one of these illuminated manuscripts. They took years to produce, and you would be very proud of it when you got it. It would be one of the very few books you owned; maybe the only one. You'd want it to be obvious that it was yours. Some people did this by having a picture of themselves as one of the illustrations. Others asked the scribe to include their coat of arms. Occasionally this would be done by painting a series of coats of arms in the margin alongside the Tree of Jesse. In effect the owner was saying: 'Here's Jesus' family tree – the most important one there is, and here's my family tree right alongside it. I'm important too!'

Which is fascinating, but what has it got to do with the fourth Sunday in Advent? Look at our first reading. Here we have David, who has been a good, devout and responsible king up to this point, finally settled in Jerusalem and, for the time being, not involved in fighting any of his enemies. He's built a house for himself, and now he decides that he should build a house for the Lord, because up until now the Ark of the Covenant has always been in some sort of temporary accommodation. Surely this is an entirely laudable thing to do? But much to David's surprise, God spurns his offer. Instead he will settle the children of Israel, protect them from their enemies, and build a house for David.

But God isn't talking about a building. David already has a perfectly good house to live in. 'House' is used in the sense of a people – a tribe – a population growing and spreading from the same origins. David's kingdom and his people will be established for ever. Just as God promised Abraham that he would be the founder of a great nation, now he makes the same promise to David. Which is what Gabriel is referring to when he comes to deliver that extraordinary message to Mary. She is 'of the House of David' and God will give her son the throne of his ancestor David, 'and of his kingdom there will be no end'.

There must have been a moment – one of those moments that seem to go on for ever – when Gabriel had finished speaking. Angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven held their breath. There was a choice. Abraham could have refused to sacrifice Isaac. Elijah could have given up and died in the

desert. There had been so many choices leading to this critical point, and now the whole future depended on one very young village woman. Who, thank God, was open to God. Who said yes – your will be done – ‘let it be with me according to your word’.

We know that the kingdom given to Jesus stretches far beyond the one that David ruled. Jesus’ message is for everyone, no matter who they are or where they come from: Jew, Gentile, men, women and children, world-wide. It is for everyone who believes. It’s for us, and we are part of that kingdom; part of the promise to David and to Mary. So perhaps it’s not so strange that those mediaeval barons put their coats of arms next to the Tree of Jesse. Maybe they weren’t just demonstrating that they could afford to own the book. Maybe they were laying claim to their place in the kingdom of heaven. Just as we can when, in a few moments, we declare our belief in God and say to him: ‘Your will be done’