

Sermon preached at Gisborne, Christmas Day 2021

Mighty God, the shepherds of old were full of your praises, saying that all they had heard and seen was mirrored by what they had been told. Move among us now with your Holy Spirit that we too might hear and experience the wonder and joy of the living Word as we seek to welcome the Word into our lives. Amen.

Isaiah 52:7-10; John 1:1-14

Your God reigns!

Merry Christmas! We are celebrating the birth of Jesus, who is the saviour for all. Today we'd like to explore what Christmas means through the theme – '*Your God reigns*' in Isaiah 52:7. We'll see *who this God is* first, followed by *how this God becomes our God*. Lastly, we will meditate on the meaning of *Your God reigns*.

God reveals who he is to people in both readings - Isaiah and John. In Isaiah 52:7, God is revealed through the messenger who brings peace and salvation and says to God's people, 'Your God reigns.' When a king/queen reigns over the land, it includes people's lives and everything in the land. Their sovereignty is based on land. But the reign of God begins not with a physical land but with people.

In Isaiah 52:1-6, God calls Zion awake and gets dressed to celebrate their salvation¹ from the hands of Babylon. God calls captive Jerusalem to wake up and loose the bonds of captivity,² because God wants them back.³ The long-suffering exiles wonder if God (YHWH) has abandoned them – or if the Babylonian gods are stronger than Yahweh.⁴ But God (YHWH) has not abandoned the exiles but is instead planning their redemption. Although the exiles are still in the foreign land under Babylonian sovereignty, God begins to reign over their entire being. Here the name of God – YHWH (the LORD)⁵ is helpful why this God is coming to rescue them.

¹ Isaiah 52:1

² Isaiah 52:2

³ Isaiah 52:3

⁴ First, Isaiah, who wrote chapters 1-39, has answered these questions. He has laid the responsibility for the captivity squarely at the feet of the captives. They have sinned, and exile is their punishment.

⁵ YHWH – the Tetragrammaton. It is read as 'Adonai Elohim.'

In the Old Testament, we find God's names – *Elohim* and YHWH in the first two chapters of Genesis. In Genesis chapter 1, God is exclusively referred to by the name *Elohim*. However, from Genesis 2:4 to the remainder of chapter two, God is called *Yahweh-Elohim*. The bible uses two separate names for God to describe different characteristics of one God.

Elohim is the general name for God and is used in the context of God as the creator. In English versions, *Elohim* is translated as God. It emphasizes that God is distant and powerful. This God is depicted as the awesome and majestic creator. When God goes about creating humanity, it is *Elohim* who does this act.

On the other hand, YHWH (the LORD) is God's personal name and is used in the context of God having a relationship with God's people. There is a Hebrew term, *Adonai*, in the Old Testament, which means 'my master,' or 'lord,' used for either people or God. When the Lord is personally involved with His people, YHWH is the proper way to designate God in all capital letters – LORD. By referring to God as YHWH who has a covenantal relationship with His people - Israel, they know that God is coming to rescue them. If so, how this God – YHWH-becomes our God?

In John 1:1-5, we learn that the Word was God. That is, God came to us to live with his people. Here, John tells us about a God who came to rescue his people in a fresh expression. When YHWH is a God who has a covenantal relationship with his people, this relationship is often compared to marriage. God is depicted as a husband while God's people - Israel, a wife. In this imagery of a marriage relationship, a husband and a wife are regarded as one body.

On the other hand, in John, God is depicted as a God who came to live with his people. When the word became flesh and began to live among us, becoming one body is also emphasized. In this case, God's people are called the church. They become the body of Christ. As the one body of the living God, what does 'Your God reigns' mean to us today, then?

Christmas is always a good reminder of whose we are. Although we know that we are the children of God and God reigns over our lives, what does it mean to us individually or collectively? If God is the Father of us, what sort of Father is this God? If God is the husband for all believers, what does it mean? If we – the church is the bride of God, who is the groom, what are we supposed to live as the bride?

Today, we celebrate the arrival of the infant God who came to reign over our lives, and this is the very acknowledgement of God's sovereignty over everything. Indeed God, who took a

vulnerable form of human being, began to reign over the world from the beginning. Every year, we tell and retell the Nativity to our children, grandchildren, and world. This story tells them about the king who reigns over everything by being in the right relationship with Godhead. This relationship is not only for one day but every day throughout the year. Isaiah says it in a few words: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”⁶ We truly believe this God reigns over everything. Amen.

⁶ Isaiah 9:6