

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

^{33:14} The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Commentary

This passage in Jeremiah begins the season of Advent and is read because of the early Christians' conviction that Jesus was the legitimate heir to David's kingdom. The Book of Jeremiah is a collection of prophetic oracles spoken by Jeremiah during his long ministry, from 627 BC to 587 and beyond. While other prophets were proclaiming peace and promising God's blessing and protection during this time, Jeremiah proclaimed God's displeasure and punishment. He also, however, proclaimed God's faithfulness to the promises made to David and Levi. After the land was laid desolate, God would once again bring Joy to the people. This promise of restoration focuses on a legitimate heir ("a righteous branch") from the house of David to reign over Judah. Jeremiah and his hearers would have understood this as a promise that any disaster would not be final, but that independence and good fortune would be reestablished under future Davidic kings. After centuries of foreign domination and priestly corruption, this reading highlights the enduring conviction that God's promises cannot fail, even though they may not happen entirely as expected. As Christians who await the coming of the Messiah during Advent, this word from Jeremiah reminds us of our connection with others who have awaited their messiah—though the nature of "kingship" has been radically altered by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Reflection

What are some signs in our time and lives that God remains faithful to this promise? What recent events, personal and global, may tempt us to doubt this? Where do you turn for assurance?

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

^{3:9} How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹² And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³ And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Commentary

In turning “to God from idols”, the Christians in Thessalonica also turned away from some of their non-Christian neighbors’ social and civic gatherings. Outsiders could easily come to view the Christian movement as one that turned good citizens into anti-social atheists—gathering in secret, showing no solidarity with the larger city, and looking forward to the overthrow of the Roman order. It should not surprise us, therefore, to find these non-Christians applying pressure on their neighbors to bring them back to conformity with what the Greco-Roman culture would regard as an acceptable way of life. Paul sends a letter that focuses on seeking God’s approval when Jesus returns and explains the insults and abuse believers endure as the natural reaction of ignorant people against the ways of God—to their detriment. Paul’s thanksgiving reminds hearers Whom they must please, even if their neighbors censure them. Hope and holiness are also Advent themes. This season of preparation is viewed as a time of waiting and expectancy, a time to look inward and prepare to present ourselves as blameless before God. Paul urges the Thessalonians to make ready for the Lord’s coming.

Reflection

When were some times when your doing things God’s way evoked a negative response from those around you? What kept you faithful? How can we both be a witness to our faith and maintain relationships with persons whom we hope to influence for good?

Luke 21:25-36

^{21:25} "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." ²⁹ Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven

and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴ "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Commentary

As Jesus' last teaching before his passion and death, this chapter assumes a certain solemnity. In the preceding passage, Luke has interpreted Jesus' words about the "desolating sacrilege" in light of the Roman siege of Jerusalem at the end of the Jewish War of A.D. 66-70. This is Luke's way of emphasizing for his post-70 audience that Jesus' predictions of the Temple's destruction had come true, thus underscoring the reliability of other statements about his end and return. Throughout early Christian literature, one finds church leaders pointing believers to the day of the Lord—when Christians would be vindicated by God and their detractors and antagonists exposed to fear and shame—as a means of encouraging them to remain steadfast in their hope and witness. Israel had originally conceived of this day as the time in which oppressors would be routed and Israel, under God, would be restored, purified, and made wholly God's own. As the sins of the nation became ever more blatant, hope still remained for restoration. These words about the Second Coming close with an exhortation naming worldly concerns and self-deluding pleasures as the greatest threat to our eternal well-being.

Reflection

In regard to that Day, are you living now as one who is asleep or awake to Christ's coming? How realistic is this expectation held of faithful believers for you?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 25:1-10

^{25:1} To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

² **O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.**

³ Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴ Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.

⁵ Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
**for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.**

⁶ Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love,

for they have been from of old.

⁷ **Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O LORD!**

⁸ Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹ He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰ **All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.**

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**