

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.

Isaiah 65:17-25

^{65:17} For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. ¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. ¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. ²⁰ No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²² They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. ²³ They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD-- and their descendants as well. ²⁴ Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. ²⁵ The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent--its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

Commentary

Background: *This book can be divided into two (and possibly three) parts. Chapters 1 to 39 were written before the exile, from about 740 BC to about 700 BC. Chapters 40 to 66 were written during and after the Exile in Babylon. They are filled with a message of trust and confident hope that God will soon end the Exile. Some scholars consider that Chapters 56 to 66 form a third part of the book, written after the return to the Promised Land. These chapters speak of hope and despair; they berate the people for their sin, for worshipping other gods.*

Before this week's reading, the prophet Isaiah has been calling upon God to leave aside his anger at Israel, and to have mercy on the exiles as they contemplate their ruined home. Here, God answers: he promises good things to those who turn away from idolatry, and worship him once again. God will completely transform the cosmos ("new heavens and a new earth", v. 17); he will forget his people's waywardness. The inhabitants of the new Jerusalem will be joyful (v. 18); sorrow will cease (v. 19). Long life was considered a blessing; now lifetimes will be even longer (v. 20). Life will be stable and harvests plentiful; God will bless his people (vv. 21-23). In v. 22, the "tree" is probably the *tree of life* in the Garden of Eden: there will be a return to the

sin-free life God originally intended. Now God will initiate dialogue with humankind: he will no longer wait for his people to seek him (v. 24). All will be at peace in “my holy mountain” (v. 25), the new Jerusalem. Conflict between animals and humans will cease, and all will live in harmony.

Reflection

Isaiah’s vision of the Peaceable Kingdom has enthralled believers for thousands of years. If you could design a perfect world, what would it look like? What place would God hold within it?

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

^{3:6} Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. ⁹ This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. ¹¹ For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. ¹² Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

Commentary

Background: *Perhaps this epistle was written to combat the idea that the end of the era has come, something the Thessalonian Christians have learnt either verbally from a false teacher or from a letter purporting to be written by Paul. Scholars debate whether Paul wrote this letter, or whether its author was someone writing under his name.*

The author comes to the concluding section of his letter, written to counter the false belief that Christ will come again soon. Writing in Paul’s name, he has asked all members of the church at Thessalonica to pray for him and for those who work with him “so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly” (v. 1), and that they may be rescued from those who oppose God’s ways, especially those who teach falsehoods. God will “strengthen ... and guard” (v. 3) members of the community from the Devil. May Christ direct them to love for God and to “the steadfastness of Christ” (v. 5).

Now the author orders the members to avoid those who, believing that the era will end soon, “are living in idleness” (v. 6) – probably living off the material support of others and failing to spread Christ’s message. (The Greek suggests that these people are *disorderly*.) They also fail to adhere to the “tradition”, the teachings handed down from the apostles. Paul (“us”) is proposed as an example to imitate: he had the “right” (v. 9) to be financially supported by the community (thus freeing him to spend all his time spreading the good news) yet he earned his

living (as a tentmaker). V. 10b is strong language! It has been reported that those who are *idle* are in fact “busybodies” (v. 11), disturbing others and meddling in their affairs. If any continue to preach the imminent arrival of Christ or continue to be idle (“do not obey ...”, v. 14), avoid them and shame them (perhaps they will see the error of their ways). Even so, love them as members of the community (v. 15).

Reflection

We tend to regard as mis-directed those whose belief in an imminent End Time compels them to stockpile supplies or weapons. Yet this is evidently what some of the Thessalonians were doing. If you were certain that the world were coming to an end soon, how would that knowledge change your believing or your acting?

Luke 21:5-19

^{21:5} When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶ "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." ⁷ They asked him, "Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?" ⁸ And he said, "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them. ⁹ "When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately." ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹ there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven. ¹² "But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. ¹³ This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴ So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; ¹⁵ for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all because of my name. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your souls.

Commentary

Our reading is from the last story about Jesus' teaching in the Temple. He foretells its destruction (“thrown down”, v. 6) – an event then some 40 years in the future. At that time, Roman legions (“armies”, v. 20) surrounded the city. In Jesus' time, people were concerned about when the world would end, and what signs would indicate “this is about to take place” (v. 7). Jesus begins to answer, in terms drawn from prophetic books (Micah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, vv. 8-11) and brought together in contemporary books (e.g. 2 Esdras). He adds “the end will not follow immediately” (v. 9), and then diverts to issues that matter now: the treatment his followers will receive, and how they should react to it (vv. 12-19). (“The time”, v. 8, is the time chosen by God for the end of the era.)

They will be treated as he has been: they will be accused of heresy in “synagogues” (v. 12) and be brought before civil courts (“prisons”). On these occasions, be yourselves (the word translated “prepare ... in advance”, v. 14, literally means *practice a gesture* or *rehearse a dance*); take this “an opportunity to testify” (v. 13, to tell the good news). Following Christ entails suffering – *betrayal* (v. 16) and being “hated” (v. 17). Perseverance under duress will gain you eternal life (v. 19). In vv. 20-27, Jesus combines prophecy (when Jerusalem was invaded, Christians did flee across the Jordan) and more images drawn from prophetic and contemporary books (“desolation”, v. 20; vv. 23-26). We do not know whether to take these images literally or symbolically.

Jesus, the “Son of Man” (v. 27), will then come again. True disciples should then “stand up and raise your heads” (v. 28) for you will soon have eternal life (“redemption”). So (vv. 34-36), be prepared for this day, “praying that you may have the strength to escape”, to avoid the fate of the ungodly.

Reflection

You may have noticed that there is an *eschatological* theme to all three of this week’s readings: that is, they focus on what the world will look like after the end of history. The Second Coming – the idea that “Christ will come in final glory and we (will) feast at his heavenly banquet” (in the words of our communion liturgy) has always been a central part of Christian teaching. What difference does this doctrine make to your life of faith?

Isaiah 12

^{12:1} You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.

² Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

⁴ And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵ Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.

⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

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.