

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 2:1-5

^{2:1} The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. ² In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³ Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴ He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. ⁵ O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of 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. These were difficult times for the southern kingdom, Judah: a disastrous war was fought with Syria; the Assyrians conquered Israel, the northern kingdom, in 723 BC, and threatened Judah. Isaiah saw the cause of these events as social injustice, which he condemned, and against which he fought valiantly. 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. Like Second Isaiah, this part speaks of the hope that God will soon restore Jerusalem to its former glory and make a new home for all peoples.*

Isaiah wrote these verses about 740 BC, a time when spirits were low in Judah: Assyrian armies were bent on conquest, and many people doubted God's power to preserve the dynasty of David in accordance with his promise; others believed themselves to be invincible in the face of enemies.

Because Chapter 1 begins with similar words, it appears that this and the next few chapters originally formed a separate document. The ideas in vv. 2-4 are also found in Micah 4. In the future ("in days to come", v. 2) God will launch a new era in which he will dwell on earth

("house"), at Jerusalem. His presence above all others on earth symbolizes his sovereignty. (Jerusalem began on the eastern hill or "mountain". By Isaiah's time it had expanded on to part of the western hill. "Zion", v. 3, was originally the name of the southern slope of the eastern hill, the site of the first settlement. The name was later used for the whole city.)

The prophet foretells a time when all peoples will make pilgrimage to Jerusalem ("let us go up", v. 3) to worship God – to learn the way of living revealed by God. The city will be the source of "instruction" in ethical living. In Chapter 30, Isaiah tells us that in his time Judah rejected God's message, but in this future time all peoples will accept it. (The Hebrew word for "instruction" is *torah* which is also a name for the first five books of the Bible, the Law.) In this future time, God will settle disputes among nations ("judge", v. 4) and between people ("arbitrate"). It will be an age of peace and plenty: warfare being a thing of the past, agriculture ("plowshares", "pruning hooks") will prosper. (Conquering armies lived off the land and farmers were needed for military service.) In v. 5, Isaiah exhorts the people to adopt God's ways now.

Reflection

The season of Advent means "coming" – in Advent, the Church both anticipates the birth of Jesus Christ as a baby in Bethlehem, and it looks toward a new birth for all of Creation at the end of time. Read aloud Isaiah's famous prophecy of peace - "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." What resonance do these words hold for you?

Romans 13:11-14

^{13:11} Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Commentary

Background: *The Letter to the Romans is the first epistle in the New Testament, although not the first to be written. Paul wrote it to the church at Rome, which included both Jews and Gentiles. His primary theme is the basics of the good news of Christ, salvation for all people. The book was probably written in 57 AD, when Paul was near the end of his third missionary journey around the Eastern Mediterranean. It is unusual in that it was written to a church that Paul had not visited.*

Paul has written in the preceding verses that the only obligation that Christians have toward other Christians and towards non-Christians is "love." Love in the social sphere will take the form of moral conduct and ethical behavior. Now, Paul tells us another reason why ethical behavior is important for Christians. We know that we are living both in the present and in the age which is after the first coming of the Messiah and before the second: "salvation is nearer to

us now than when we became believers” (v. 11). Paul expresses it in terms of night and day: we should awake, pass from darkness to light, from evil to good. The image of armor is also found in contemporary Jewish writings about the end of the age; in 1 Thessalonians 5:8, Paul tells us that the “armor of light” (v. 12) is faith, hope, love for each other, fidelity, uprightness, etc. “Let us live” (v. 13), he says, as if the Day of the Lord is already here, “honorably”, not in ways that harm ourselves and our neighbors. Rather, let Christ be our armor, and let us not give in to the temptations of the flesh. (In baptism, we have already “put on”, v. 12, Christ, but life in Christ is something that grows with experience. As we grow in the faith, we are more and more able to resist sinful opportunities.)

Reflection

Remaining “awake” and vigilant is a constant theme of the lectionary readings for Advent. What do you think Paul means when he writes that “now the moment for you to wake from sleep”? What does wakefulness mean to you in a spiritual sense?

Matthew 24:36-44

^{24:36} "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Commentary

Background: *This gospel is the first in the New Testament, but it was probably the second to be written. Scholars recognize that it borrows material from Mark, and from a sayings source containing sayings of Jesus and known as Q (for Quelle, German for source). The author shows an understanding of Jewish culture and religion not found in the other gospels. It was probably written about 60 to 70 AD, possibly for a largely Jewish audience.*

Speaking to his followers, Jesus has foretold the destruction of the Temple; he has told them the signs of the coming of the end times (in terms used in contemporary literature.) In the suffering and trials which will precede the End, society will break down, “many will fall away” (v. 10, from the faith) but “one who endures to the end will be saved” (v. 13). After these events, the “Son of Man” (vv. 27, 30) will come “with power and great glory”. This will mark the beginning of a new era, a new way of being. Followers should discern signs of the second coming of Christ (vv. 32-35).

But (v. 36), we do not know precisely when that coming will be, and neither does Jesus. The situation will be like that before the Flood: people were preoccupied with earthly matters (v. 38). When the Flood came, a small number “entered the ark” and were saved, but many drowned. The dawn of the new era will also be like this; Jesus gives two examples: of men (v. 40) and of women (v. 41). Some will be “taken” to be with Christ (because they are prepared) but others will be “left”. V. 43 is an other example. “Keep awake” (v. 42) to the will of God: be ready for Christ’s second coming!

Reflection

Again we see the theme of wakefulness offered as a reminder to Christians that another world is coming after this one falls away. Verses 40-41 have been used to support the idea of a general “rapture” at the end of time. Nowhere in the Bible is the word “rapture” to be found; however, we are all charged with being ready for Christ’s return. Are you?

Responsive Reading

Psalm 122

^{122:1} I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!"

² Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

³ Jerusalem built as a city that is bound firmly together.

⁴ To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

⁵ For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David.

⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you.

⁷ Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers."

⁸ For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you."

⁹ For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

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.