

Luke 21:25-36

Jesus teaches the disciples to be watchful for the signs of the coming destruction, using the apocalyptic language of signs in the heavens, dismay among the nations, and unusual behaviour in the natural world. After these signs, people will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud in splendour. So, his disciples must be watchful, ready to read the signs and keep their hearts faithful.

“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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. “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, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 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”.

Jesus’ discourse points to a profound loss of control: “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the power of the heavens will be shaken”. As if that was not enough, Luke’s Jesus assures us that this will happen not only to a few, but for the whole world; what is more, that day is surely coming.

Most people live as if “that day” will somehow miss them, that somehow their name won’t come up on the draft list, that the dire sentence of disease or ruin or confusion will be suspended indefinitely, at least for them. All of us nurture this illusion. Maybe it’s a necessary one, to some extent. But Luke’s witness to the upheaval of the world underscores how that day may strike any of us and, indeed, will strike all of us.

“There have been many losses,” writes Janice Jean Springer, reflecting on the days following her diagnosis of Parkinson’s disease. Among these losses, she counts the erosion of her “self-image as a strong and vibrant woman ... ” By contrast, the struggle to keep her balance, to not fall, seems unpleasantly familiar. She has lost other things as well, but perhaps the most painful loss of all: “I’ve lost my illusions. I’ve lost the illusion that I am exempt from the losses and limits that besiege other people.” Each of us will be confronted by losses that make us wrestle with the question, “[How] can I be faithful in my new circumstances?”

Advent 1C : The coming of God’s reign is a central focus of this week’s readings. Through Jeremiah God promises a leader like David for God’s people. The Psalmist prays for such leadership and guidance. In his prayer for the Thessalonians, Paul asks them to place themselves under God’s reign, and to grow in love, able to show how they have lived as Jesus did when he returns. Finally, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus calls for us to be watchful and aware of what is happening around us, and open to the signs of the coming of God’s reign in the midst of great turmoil. While it may be tempting to push all of these promises into some future event, the Lectionary calls us to be open to God’s coming at all times - including in our lives. And, while it may be tempting to view God’s promise as an escape from the world’s turmoil, the readings this week call for us to recognise God’s presence - God’s coming - in the midst of the world’s suffering and struggle. The call, then, is to learn to be those who live with a constant sense of God’s presence regardless of our circumstances, and who cooperate with God’s work of justice, righteousness, goodness, and love. Advent calls us to remember the God who comes to us - past, present, and future. In the light of God’s eternal reign, we cannot help but reflect on our own priorities. The mark of Christ’s disciples is our love, faithfulness, righteousness, justice, and peace. These are values that last and that have universal value. But, we can only live these values when we trust in, and take notice of, the signs of God’s Reign working in our time and space. Advent calls us to be people of this kind of awareness, recognising the signs of God’s reign that are already visible in our world - in places of peace, restoration, and sacrificial service - and calling out the signs of God’s reign in other places - places of need, violence, and self-interest. This means that we cannot avoid making a commitment, as the Psalmist does, to follow God’s ways. It means that we cannot avoid living with faith in the principles and the unseen reality of God’s Reign, as Jeremiah calls God’s people to do. It means that we have to keep encouraging and strengthening one another, as the apostle does for the Thessalonians. And it means that we need to take care to live according to the values of God’s Reign, and avoid falling into the self-gratification that arises when we lose faith, or grow despairing of change. Ultimately, as we work for justice in the world, we need the Advent hope to keep us from cynicism, despair and expediency. We need the reminder that God’s Reign is at work in our world, in order to keep us faithful to what we proclaim and believe. Then, whatever we may encounter, and whoever we may have to confront or work with, we are able to embody the life-giving, hopeful Reign of God. *(Source: John van de Laar, Sacredise)*

Jeremiah 33:14-16

God promises to raise up a descendant of David to reign over God's people and to bring goodness, rightness, justice, and security to Israel and Judah.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 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. 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."

Psalms 25: 1-10

A prayer for God's compassion and forgiveness, for God to make God's ways known to the Psalmist, and to lead him in God's truth. For God is good and righteousness, guiding the weak to justice and leading those who keep God's covenant in paths of love and faithfulness.

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust;

do not let me be put to shame;

do not let my enemies exult over me.

Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;

let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

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

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,

for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember me,

for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

Good and upright is the Lord; therefore God instructs sinners in the way. God leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,

for those who keep God's covenant and God's decrees.

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

The apostle gives thanks for the Thessalonian church, praying to see them and help them grow in faith. He also prays that they may grow in love, and have strong and holy hearts when Jesus comes.

How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. 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. 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.

The passage begins with the words, "How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel ... " Love is increasing and abounding. Yet the idea that the Christian life is inevitably filled with love and joy and thankfulness and peace is a misnomer. And yet there is no hiding the reality that in these verses they are central.

This letter is addressed to a small community of Christ-followers. From the beginning things were not easy. The broader population is often threatened when small groups begin to re-evaluate their allegiance to the ruling powers and transfer their commitment over to a new Lord, even Jesus Christ (Acts 17:7). Stability and the status quo are reassuring norms for most societies, even if injustice and inequality are sometimes the price we have to pay. Paul speaks of how the Thessalonians "turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from the heavens, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath." These early Christians have turned away from idols and aligned themselves with a new Lord. The radicalism of this move should not be underestimated. Idols permeated every level of city life: home, work, family, religion, economics, politics. Nothing was excluded from attentiveness and devotion to the gods. The Christian community would be separated from everything that would ordinarily be considered normal, creating pressures and even stresses in the home, marketplace, and the workplace. For a newly converted Thessalonian, the gathered community of disciples was their new home, family, and support network. Relationships mattered more now than ever as they sought to work out together what it meant to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. (*Edward Pillar*)