

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the seventh Verse of the thirty-third Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.

“... And I will cause the captivity of Judah and the captivity of Israel to return, and will build them, as at the first. And I will cleanse them from all their iniquity, whereby they have sinned against me; and I will pardon all their iniquities, whereby they have sinned, and whereby they have transgressed against me.

“And it shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and an honour before all the nations of the earth, which shall hear all the good that I do unto them: and they shall fear and tremble for all the goodness and for all the prosperity that I procure unto it. Thus saith the LORD; Again there shall be heard in this place, which ye say shall be desolate without man and without beast, even in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, that are desolate, without man, and without inhabitant, and without beast, The voice of joy, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the voice of them that shall say, Praise the LORD of hosts: for the LORD is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: and of them that shall bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the LORD. For I will cause to return the captivity of the land, as at the first, saith the LORD. Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Again in this place, which is desolate without man and without beast, and in all the cities thereof, shall be an habitation of shepherds causing their flocks to lie down. In the cities of the mountains, in the cities of the vale, and in the cities of the south, and in the land of Benjamin, and in the places about Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, shall the flocks pass again under the hands of him that telleth them, saith the LORD. Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will perform that good thing which I have promised unto the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.

“In those days, and at that time, will I cause the Branch of righteousness to grow up unto David; and he shall execute judgment and righteousness in the land. In those days shall Judah be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell safely: and this is the name wherewith she shall be called, The LORD our righteousness.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians.

“Paul and Silvanus and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers: Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father; Knowing brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. And ye became followers of us, and the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia [**Mass-edd-OH-knee-uh**] and Achaia [**Uh-KYE-uh**]. For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia [**Mass-edd-OH-knee-uh**] and Achaia [**Uh-KYE-uh**], but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing. For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will perform that good thing which I have promised unto the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction and Theme:

In today’s First Lesson, Jeremiah foretells that God will overthrow Jerusalem in judgement and then will follow that overthrow with a three-fold restoration. The first part of this restoration will be the restoration of the people of Israel to their

land; the second part will be the restoration of that land to prosperity; and the third part will be the restoration of the King of the Davidic line to rule over Israel.

The first part of Jeremiah's prophecy, that of the overthrow of Jerusalem, was twice fulfilled in the most literal possible way. The first such overthrow was still within the Old Testament period itself, in 597 B.C., when the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar [*Neh-boo-kud-NEZZ-ur*] captured the city and destroyed the Temple. In New Testament times, in 70 A.D., the city was again captured, and the Temple destroyed, by the Roman generals, and later Emperors, Vespasian and Titus.

Homily:

In the Gospels, we see one effect of that first capture and destruction. In light of Jeremiah's prophecy, and in particular of his promise of the restoration of political independence under a Davidic king, the Jews of Jesus's day were looking for an earthly savior in the form of the leader of a military rebellion against the foreign occupation of their land. Indeed, it was largely the disappointment of the populace, that the hero it acclaimed on Palm Sunday turned out not to be a candidate for that secular rôle, that led to the crowd's cries on Good Friday for Our Lord's crucifixion.

Thus, every Christmas celebration contains within it, as an essential element, a recollection of the death on Good Friday of the human and divine Child Who was born in Bethlehem. In the same way, every Christmas celebration also contains within it a recollection of the Easter Resurrection of that same Child, with its victory over sin and death.

But what of the second part of Jeremiah's prophecy, the one that foretells a three-fold restoration? This was never fulfilled, in the literal sense, after either Nebuchadnezzar's [*Neh-boo-kud-NEZZ-urz*] or Titus's captures of the city, because in neither case was a Davidic King ever reinstalled as the earthly ruler of that land.

The answer, I suggest, is that while this restoration never occurred in the physical realm, it did occur in the spiritual one. That is, Jeremiah's prophecy of the

three-fold restoration of Israel was actually a foretelling the coming and triumph of Our Lord, Jesus Christ.

First, there is the restoration of the people of Israel to their land. If “land” is seen as physical topography, as the soil that can be turned by a plow or penetrated by the roots of the grapevine, then Jeremiah was wrong and this restoration never occurred, at least not before 1948. Indeed, the entire history of the Jewish people after the destruction of the Second Temple can be seen as the unsuccessful search to recover the land once occupied by the Twelve Tribes. Even the modern secular State of Israel does not possess the entirety of that territory, nor given present political realities is it ever likely to.

However, if “land” is seen a bit more broadly, as “home land” and therefore as “home”, then Jeremiah spoke truly. For Our Lord restored the relationship between humankind and God that was wounded by Adam’s disobedience. Now, therefore, humans can once again dwell in their true home, in God’s Kingdom.

Christ’s Church is both the New Israel of God’s promises and the projection of that Kingdom into this world and so we who live in the Church also live, in a small but real way, in the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus we are now restored to our true home in Israel.

Second, there is the matter of the restoration of the land to prosperity. If we interpret Jeremiah’s words in the literal, physical sense, then we must note that from 70 A.D. until the 1950s, Palestine was always desperately poor. Even Israel’s agricultural renaissance of the past sixty years, with its land reclamation, tree planting, and irrigation works, has not lifted that beleaguered country from economic fragility, marked by a disproportionate share of its production devoted to military defense and a rapid outflow of its population.

However, if we interpret the prophet as speaking of a spiritual restoration, then we cannot fail to notice that the portion of the Kingdom of God that is represented by Christ’s Church has prospered enormously since Christ’s death. The Gospel message has reached nearly every corner of the world, the Christian Faith underlies the most successful cultural expressions of the past millennium, and Christians form one of the largest identifiable groups among the entire population of the earth.

This is to say nothing of the spiritual and cultural riches Christianity has brought to the whole of humankind, including especially the concept of the individual person not as raw material for a collective as a being of unique and precious worth. Almost every significant positive benefit we associate with so-called “modern” society, from the institution of the university to civil rights, is a product of the Christian Church, either originated by it or transmitted by it from the Greco-Roman heritage.

The third part of Jeremiah’s prophecy dealt with the restoration of the King of the Davidic line to rule over Israel. In the secular sense, this never happened, which is the principal reason for the failure of the modern State of Israel to appear a convincing object of that prophecy.

However, Our Lord, who is by human reckoning a descendant the Davidic genealogy, is in the spiritual realm “the King of Kings”. As the ruler over sin and death, His powers extend far beyond those of any earthly sovereign and more than satisfy the conditions foreseen by Jeremiah.

Conclusion:

This fulfillment of Jeremiah’s triple prophecy, in the spiritual sense even if not in the political sense, brings us back to what was our starting point. Our Lord’s victory in spiritual matters was only possible because of His apparent failure in worldly matters. So the Son of God, Who was appointed by God the Father to be Judge of the living and the dead, was Himself judged and put to death by His own subjects.

So, as we said before, every Christmas celebration of Our Lord’s birth includes the essential elements both of His death on Good Friday and of His Resurrection on Easter. The helpless babe is the Ruler and Judge of all creation.

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*The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister
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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928, 1943).*

¹ *Jeremiah 33: 7-16 (KJV).*

¹ *I Thessalonians 1: 1-10 (KJV).*

¹ *Jeremiah 33: 14 (KJV).*

¹ *L.E.H. Stephens-Hodge, Jeremiah, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED, 3rd Ed. 646-47 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970).*

¹ *Priest Assistant, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA. Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.*