

“The Days are Coming”
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23:5-19
November 21, 2010
Christ the King Sunday
Rev. Peter Shidemantle

“Behold, the days are coming . . .” The word of the prophet, the word of God. These words, or words like them, are used throughout the Old Testament, especially by the prophets, but in the New Testament as well, to point to a time, either of judgment or a time of fulfillment of a promised day of justice and peace – sometimes both together – a time when things will be different than how they are now. It will be a time when God will bring about, through God’s servants, what humanity has never been able to bring about on our own.

The faith of Jews and Christians alike looks ahead by looking back. Both are faiths that are rooted in how we believe and have been taught that God has acted in history in decisive ways to choose us, to save us, and to bless us. We draw meaning for the present both from the past that has formed us and from the future that is promised.

The “days (that) are coming” are described in different ways by different prophets and figures in the scriptures – but they have in common the understanding and expectation that they are days that will be arrived at in history, among the nations and peoples of the world, not in eternity. That promise is there too, of course, but “the days that are coming” refer not to a world beyond time, but in it. Jeremiah’s vision from the Lord is one of a righteous king (the presentation this morning) who will deal wisely with the people and who execute justice and righteousness in the land. Judah will be saved; Israel will dwell securely. Our Christian tradition has read Jesus as that king, whose reign of justice has begun as a spiritual, though not yet political, reality, and that through Christ is not for Israel alone but for the whole world.

Both visions, both promises (two sides of the same coin) are brought by our scripture readings to this day in our church year that is called Christ the King Sunday. It is the last Sunday of the Christian year. Our gospel reading, which seems more appropriate for Lent than for these days approaching Advent and Christmas, says something about the kind of king we have – one who rules dying on a cross of execution. In the church we don't exactly ring out the old year on a high note, but with the suffering and death of a king who seems nothing like a king, and a promise that describes a world that is very little like the one we know.

In the meantime, as the old hymn puts it, “we walk by faith and not by sight.” That's not an easy thing to do, holding on to faith in the face of experience, by what we see and know. For the last few hundred years, especially, as scientific knowledge has advanced, the church has often, and often reluctantly, had to modify its beliefs – some would say to avoid abandoning them altogether. Before Galileo's time, I understand, it was already apparent that the sun did not make a perfectly circular course around the earth, as Ptolemy and Aristotle claimed. But instead of abandoning that theory, astronomers continually modified it by trying to explain in increasingly complex ways why in fact the sun did travel around the earth. Eventually the whole theory became so weighed down with these modifications that it crashed into dust – to be replaced by the elegant alternative put forward by Galileo. The church at the time, as we know, fought this tooth and nail.

This seems like such a backward, unenlightened reaction now, but it is not an unfamiliar reaction to us. It's always tempting to lead by “sight,” by what we see, know, experience, modifying our faith along the way, perhaps to the point where the whole thing just crumbles away. I suppose there are some people whose faith has crumbled in the face of scientific arguments advanced by some famous modern atheists, but it is even more the experience of suffering and loss, and evidence of (as we used to say) “man's inhumanity to

man” that, for many, chip away at the foundations of faith. We’ll often hear it said, “I can’t believe in a God who would allow . . .”

But faith isn’t “blind” either, as if unaffected by what happens to us or goes on in the world. We can’t have a faith that refuses to see. Otherwise it gets hardened into dogma, a faith that chooses ignorance as its companion, faith that is closed and cannot learn from other ways. At its extreme, a faith that refuses to see, that closes itself off from experience reduces us to being allies of the terrorists whose faith is unaffected by reason, let alone by love for others. There are plenty of “theological terrorists” in all traditions.

Our “back to back” kings in our presentation of scripture this morning points to a kind of dilemma. On the one hand, the traditional Christian reading of Jeremiah’s vision is that the “righteous branch” of the house of David is Jesus himself – but we don’t yet see his wise and righteous reign in the social and political realities of our world. We have deferred it until some vague time of Christ’s coming again – something even further out from our experience. There are those who claim to see the signs, who claim to know what God has planned, claiming more than Jesus ever claimed in this regard. And there are those who believe that you can legislate God’s will into reality, bring “righteousness” to a nation through majority vote, if not by violent enforcement. On the other hand, some would say we’ve seen too much, learned too much to hold on to the old belief systems until it seems almost inevitable that eventually it will collapse of its own weight.

Well, we know that some things need to collapse. God’s judgment is about the destruction of all that we have built up that fools us into believing that we are the rulers of our own lives. We may have a god, but it’s a god who is under our control, a god who serves us, rather than a God whom we serve. Impatient with a god who refuses to deliver to our liking, or according to our own timetable, we let the world’s priorities, the world’s arguments, the world’s evidence take the lead.

When Jesus' disciples were admiring the marvel of the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem, he said that the whole thing would come tumbling down. He wasn't threatening a terrorist act, as some accused him. He was judging a faith and a religion that had transferred the core faith and hope in the promises of God to the structures that claim to contain it, until it would crumble from its own weight. The wise person builds a house on rock, and not on sand, he would teach, and we don't have the construction materials to get the job done all by ourselves. We may be rooted, we may have our foundation, in what we believe and have been taught about how God has acted in history on behalf of God's chosen – but our salvation, the fullness of God's reign in our lives, in the life of the church and the life of the world, is established not in restoring us to some real or imagined days of glory gone by, but by being transformed into new creatures, heading for a new creation, the promised fulfillment of all things in God.

As Clarence Jordan used to say, you've got to be equipped for this new order, this new creation. He likened it to the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. The caterpillar crawls along the ground thinking that's all there's going to be – until something starts stirring in her and she begins to spin her cocoon, until in time she emerges as a beautiful butterfly, equipped with all she needs for her new order of life. This is how he saw the disciples of Jesus, a microcosm of society – a tax collector, a zealot, a few fishermen, and the others – people who in the old order would not have been caught dead together. He put them into the same fellowship, bathed them in the teachings and demonstration of the kingdom of God, and together they gave witness to what this kingdom was about, how it was to live free under the reign of God. This is where we come from. It's not a matter of returning to some idealized past, but moving forward in ever new cycles of transformation.

As Jesus hung there from the cross, none of this was apparent. What was apparent

was that Jesus was defeated, that the world had defeated him. And this is where the gospel starts, with crucifixion and defeat. The human hopes of God have always been overturned by history. God never fulfilled the expectations of the Jewish people that God would make them forever safe within the promised land. God has never responded finally, decisively to the earnest prayers to establish justice on earth. God has never appeared under the expected form, never worked dependably through human political institutions. And despite God's love for us, he has never kept us consistently from harm.

But these are not just disappointments, because we know that the most enduring lessons of life come to us, not primarily through victory or success, but through struggle and even loss. It's not the way we would choose, but it is the way God has chosen to be with us. Christ rules in us not through demonstrations of kingly power but through the power of suffering love, so that, in the end, things are not as they seem. Love is stronger than death – and God has graced our lives with this love, which makes all things new.

As we have welcomed brothers and sisters into this fellowship of faith this morning we see the evidence of God's renewal strategy. We give thanks for the faith and vision that gave form and shape to this people of God, to the God who has brought us thus far by his grace. By the power of the Holy Spirit God is continually working to transform us for the joyful work of the kingdom of God. We can never be content to be caterpillars in faith. God wants to give us wings. Do you feel it? Do you sense it?