

Jer 33:14-16  
1Thes 3:9-13  
Luke 21:20-36

Jer. 33:15 "In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

The season of Advent is above all else a time of waiting, a time of hope and expectation, and a time of anticipation as we prepare to celebrate the festival of Christmas. Traditionally during Advent, Christians prepare to receive their saviour at his birth, and they also look forward to his future coming.

At first sight our OT and Gospel lessons may not seem to have very much in common, but what does bind them together is that both arise from a situation of impending crisis, and both offer hope for what lies beyond that crisis. Our OT lesson is a prophesy given by Jeremiah at a time when the Babylonians, the super power of the day, were besieging Jerusalem. This was an event that Jeremiah had long foreseen, and for some time he had taught that the only realistic course of action was for the city to submit to the Babylonians. He regarded it as the will of God that all the nations should serve the king of Babylon. But this was not a popular message, and it brought him into conflict with certain nationalistic prophets who were encouraging rebellion against Babylon.

The Judaeen king, Zedekiah, finally allowed himself to be persuaded into making just such a rebellion, and the Babylonians soon took decisive retribution, by besieging the city. Throughout the siege, Jeremiah still consistently urged the people to surrender, and this caused him to be regarded as a traitor, and to be put into prison. It was during his time in prison that he gave that prophecy in 33:14-16. It is really quite remarkable that at time when Judah and Jerusalem were facing an imminent and utter catastrophe, Jeremiah could give a message of hope.

In order to do this, he took an old prophecy that he had given some time ago and re-applied it to the present situation of crisis. You can find that earlier prophecy in 23:5-6. On this earlier occasion, Jeremiah was condemning the political leaders of the day, whom he described as shepherds. They should have taken good care of the sheep of God's pasture, that is to say, God's people, but instead they scattered the flock and drove them away. Therefore God would gather the remnant of his flock from the countries where they had been driven, and bring them back to his fold. He would set shepherds over them, who would care for them, so that they would not need to fear, and none of them would go missing again. To this message Jeremiah added God's promise that he would "raise up for David a righteous Branch", who would reign as king and deal wisely, and execute justice and righteousness in the land."

Jeremiah lived in troubled times, and as the people of his day looked back at the earlier history of their nation, the reign of King David seemed like something of a golden age, when Judah together with Israel was prosperous

and powerful, and was led by one who had been chosen by God. How different their present day leaders were! Jeremiah, therefore, looked forward to what he called a "righteous Branch", a future ruler of David's line, who would rule justly, and restore the fortunes of the nation. In Jeremiah's words: "In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'" This was the message which the prophet had given some years ago, and now as the nation was on the brink of disaster, and the situation was utterly desperate, he repeated that message (with only a few small changes) as a word of hope and encouragement.

As the years went by and the nation often went through hard times, with a future that seemed uncertain, Jeremiah's words were repeatedly taken up, and used to provide hope that a messianic leader would arise and restore the fortune of his people. Already, the prophet Zechariah, who ministered to the exiles who had returned from Babylon to the ruins of Jerusalem, used Jeremiah's prophesy as an assurance that what was destroyed would be rebuilt. Zechariah said of the high priest Joshua, "Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall grow up in his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD." (6:12) And in a later age still, the people who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls made use of the prophecies of Jeremiah as they looked forward to a messianic figure whom they called the Branch of David.

Our Gospel lesson from Luke 21 also arises from a situation of impending crisis. This is part of a long discourse given by Jesus to his disciples in Jerusalem during the last week of his life. You could say that this was a situation of immediate crisis for Jesus and the disciples, as indeed it was, since Jesus's crucifixion was only days away, and for a time the disciples would have their world utterly turned upside down. And as in the days of Jeremiah, a time of crisis for the city of Jerusalem and its people was drawing ever nearer.

All three of the synoptic Gospels give an account of Jesus's teaching on this occasion. But St Luke embellishes his account with some particular details of the what took place in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and with it the temple. It is a matter of debate among scholars as to whether the words in Luke 21 were written after AD 70 by someone who had knowledge of the actual course of events, or whether they represent a prophecy written before the event. In any event, there seems little doubt that Jesus foretold the violent end to which Jerusalem was hastening.

St Luke's account of Jesus's prophecy includes the words: "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then let those who are in Judaea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it; for these are days of vengeance, to fulfil all that is written ... they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." This reference to "the times of the Gentiles" is an echo of the Book of Daniel, according to which, God has given over to a Gentile kingdom

the authority to devastate Israel for a time, two times and half a time (Dan 12:7).

The events that lie ahead are then portrayed as taking on cosmic proportions, as we read: "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." The heavenly bodies were thought of by the Jews as angelic beings created by God and allowed by him to preside over the destinies of the nations in the Greco-Roman world. Thus the shaking of the powers of heaven is not so much about the ruin of the physical world as the overthrow of the imperial supremacy which held sway.

St Luke then includes the prediction in Mark and Matthew of the coming of a figure called the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven, which the early church took to refer to the glorious return of Christ. Jesus says that even though others may faint with fear because of what is happening, his disciples should stand firm, because these events mean that God's promised salvation is at hand. He tells them: "Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." St Luke ends this passage with an exhortation to the followers of Jesus to remain vigilant, lest the coming events take them by unawares.

Both Jeremiah and Jesus recognise that their nation is about to experience some traumatic events, and both of them offer a message of hope for the future beyond these events. The hope of salvation lies at the heart of our relationship with God.

We are only too aware of the pain and sorrow in the world of the here and now, and every time we say the Lord's prayer, we pray that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. The season of Advent reminds us that we live in God's world as it is now, not yet as God intends it to be. God has promised that the time will come when Christ's reign of righteousness will begin. The time is coming, God's salvation is at hand, his kingdom is near.

That time has not yet arrived, but in Advent we are called to wait patiently and to trust in God's promises.

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