



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent Romans 15:4-13 & St. Luke 21:25-33 Fr. William Klock

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We often refer to this Second Sunday in Advent as “Bible Sunday”. The hymnal suggests we sing songs like “Book of books, thy people’s strength” and “O Word of God incarnate”—hymns that celebrate Holy Scripture as our teacher, our chart and compass, our inspired source of strength until that day when, clouds and darkness ended, we see Jesus face to face. Archbishop Cranmer found this theme in today’s Epistle, where we read St. Paul’s exhortation in Romans 15:4:

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

The theme of these lessons for the Second Sunday in Advent, like the other Sundays, recalls the first advent of Jesus and calls us to be prepared for his second. But the foundation of the Protestant Reformation was the recovery of the Bible. “Sola Scriptura”—Scripture alone—was the great rallying cry of the Reformation. All things must be subject to God’s word. It is our authority by which every other authority must be measured and judged. And, as Thomas Cranmer reminds us in the Collect today, it is God’s word that teaches us our hope of Jesus and his kingdom. We pray that we might “read, mark, learn, and earnestly digest” the Scriptures that we might always hold fast to that hope.

But how? How do the Scriptures give us hope? Brothers and Sisters, they give us hope by telling us a story. *The* story of the God who created the cosmos and of his people. The Bible is full of many

different kinds of literature. There’s history and hymns and parables and prophecy. There’s story and there’s doctrine. But it all comes together around the story of God and his people. The major theme of Advent is the coming of Jesus and our need to be prepared. As we read the lessons here we’re told of God’s promises to his people and his fulfilment of them and in that we learn of the faithfulness of God. He is trustworthy and so we can trust the promises he has given to us. This is where the two themes of the day intersect. Cranmer was no dummy. By shifting the focus of Advent Sunday towards the Bible, he did nothing to take away from the older lesson of the day, the one that calls us to be prepared. This is what I want to look at today.

Let’s continue with our Epistle. Paul wrote these words to a church that was struggling with conflict—largely a conflict between Jewish and Gentile believers. They were, because of this conflict, unprepared to fulfil the mission Jesus has given his Church—to proclaim and to live the gospel to the world. So Paul’s exhortation was for them to be one, to be unified in Jesus the Messiah. But as with so many things, it’s often easier to say that sort of thing than to do it. Again, Advent calls us to be prepared. We each face our own struggles in being faithful to Jesus and to each other. We often try and we often fail. What do we do? Well, St. Paul brings us back to the foundational truths of our faith. This is what we need to build on. He brings us back to the story of God and his people and, particularly, to Jesus and his place in that story.

Unfortunately, while our Epistle reminds us of the importance of the Scriptures, it leaves out the first verses of the passage. This is where Paul identifies this problem of conflict and disunity in the Roman church and applies Scripture to it. Specifically, he cites Psalm 69:9. Verse 3 reads:

For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.”

All by itself, this verse from the Psalms is a good reminder to bear with others

and to put them first. Jesus did that and we would do well to follow his example. But Paul’s really getting at something much deeper. Sadly, most Christians don’t make a whole lot of use of the Psalms. We don’t know them as well as we should. But the Jews knew them inside and out. The Psalter was their hymnbook. And so, in the same way a modern person might quote a single line from a popular song and in doing that bring to mind a whole verse or even the whole song to make a point, to quote a single verse from a psalm would bring to mind the whole psalm. It also helps to know that this isn’t the first time in Romans that Paul has cited from Psalm 69. He uses it as a lens through which to understand the times the church was facing in those days. You see, Psalm 69 was a lament. David had sinned and was suffering the effects, but to make matters worse, his enemies were piling on, taking advantage of his suffering, and making everything worse. The Psalm begins:

Save me, O God!

For the waters have come up to my neck.

I sink in deep mire,

where there is no foothold;

**I have come into deep waters,
and the flood sweeps over me.**

(Psalm 69:1-2)

David cries out to the Lord, he calls for judgement on his enemies, and it ends with praise, knowing that the Lord will vindicate his servant, even though he hasn’t done so yet. David knew that the Lord is faithful to his promises. But, Psalm 69 isn’t just David’s song. It became Israel’s song. This was Israel’s story just as much as it was David’s. She sinned, she suffered, and then her enemies took advantage of that suffering to make things even worse, and so the nation cried out to the Lord for deliverance and in hopeful praise, knowing his promises and his faithfulness to always do what he said. And now, knowing Jesus, who represents Israel much as David did, but in a far deeper way, Paul overlays Psalm 69 on the ministry of Jesus as Messiah.

Today’s Collect urges us to “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” the Scriptures so that we might in our

journeys hold fast to the hope given us in Jesus. St. Paul shows us how to do that. It's something we really need to hear in a day when, on the one hand we have Christians who say we should unhitch ourselves from the Old Testament and, on the other hand, Christians who go to the opposite extreme and have forgotten or misunderstood what it means to be people of the new covenant and are still trying to live under the old. Paul knew the Old Testament Scriptures. He knew they were the story of his people. And he had a pretty good idea where they were headed. And then he met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. He was confronted head on by the reality that this Jesus whom he and so many others had rejected, was truly Israel's Messiah. As we say today, this "rocked his world". So much so, that he retreated for a few years into solitude to think it through and to work it all out. He suddenly had to rethink the whole story with Jesus at its centre, its culmination.

The story Paul knew was about his people, brought by the Lord into covenant with himself, who were to bring his redemption to a fallen humanity and a fallen world. The story had been worked out through a great deal of grief and suffering—a lot of it brought on themselves by their sin—but it would eventually come to its glorious fulfilment in the Messiah, who would represent them, and who would vindicate them somehow through his own suffering. And now, in Jesus, it had all happened. This was the big shock for Paul. He and so many others had been waiting for an end to the story, but the moment he met the risen Jesus, he was forced to acknowledge that Jesus really was the Messiah—and as the Messiah, Jesus was the end, or better, the *fulfilment* of it all. From Jesus he then had to read backwards and come to understand the story of the people of God through Jesus. That's not an easy thing to do. Again, Paul had to go off into solitude for a good long while to sort it out for himself. Thankfully, he's done the heavy lifting for us.

Paul shows us how this kind of Jesus-centred approach to the story is done in

the verses that follow. Here's what he writes:

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15:5-7)

Paul highlights the humility of Jesus. First, he humbled himself to be born one of us and then he humbled himself further, not only taking on himself the jeers and rejection of his people, but ultimately submitting himself to the humility of death on a cross. In our Gospels the last two weeks we saw Jesus hailed as King. By rights, Jesus could have taken his throne by violently overthrowing the Romans and Herodians, but to take his throne that way would not have fulfilled his messianic mission. Jesus humbled himself in obedience to his Father's plan of redemption. That's the model. It was the model already established in Israel's story. Now it's the model of Jesus's ministry. And that means humility will be the model of the Church's life as well. The Church cannot fulfil her mission by demanding our rights. That's not to say that there isn't a place for "rights" in the world. That's not to say that the Church shouldn't take a stand to protect the rights of others when necessary. What it means is that to walk with Jesus, to be stewards of his royal summons and the fruit of the Spirit, means putting others before ourselves. The Roman Christians needed to follow Jesus' example in this in order to settle their differences—not just for their own sake, but for the sake of the calling the Lord had given them. This is the really important part for Paul. Getting along is great, but getting along for the sake of getting along, unity for the sake of unity isn't the point. Being united and loving one another, showing Christlike humility *prepares* us for something bigger. This is about the Church's stewardship of the gospel.

And here's the thing that's really neat here. We see Paul applying the same principles—working back from Israel's story—again as he writes about the mission of the church. Here's what he writes in verse 8:

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

He's saying that there's a connection between the promise God made to Abraham and this group of struggling Christians in Rome. First—and he brings us back to the humility of Jesus—the Messiah humbled himself and became a servant to the circumcised. The circumcised are the Jews, the people of the old covenant. Jesus became a servant to them. Paul's talking about how Jesus died for *their* sins. I know we like to quote John 3:16 and talk about how Jesus died for the whole world. Jesus *did* die for the sins of everyone, but we need to be careful when we say that, that we don't short-circuit the story here. Jesus died for the sins of his own people. Even the way in which he died, crucified by the Romans, was the very death that the unrepentant Jews would face a generation later. Jesus died for his own people in order to establish a new covenant and a new covenant people—a new Israel. He did this to show that God is faithful to his promises. First, in Jesus, God was faithful to his promises to renew his people—to redeem them from sin and to fill them with his own Spirit and to gather them to himself from the nations where they had been scattered. Think of that remarkable scene at Pentecost. But then, as a result of this amazing work done through Jesus and the Spirit, the Gentiles can't help but notice. Israel had been unfaithful to God and because of that the Gentiles mocked her and they mocked the Lord. "Where is your God?" they would jeer. And yet now, even despite Israel's faithlessness, God had fulfilled his promises and the Gentiles can't help but take notice. God had done something amazing with his

own seemingly hopeless people and now the Gentiles are glorifying the God of Israel and wanting to know more. As Zechariah had prophesied:

In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’” (Zechariah 8:23)

And Paul makes this point in our Epistle, quoting more psalms that tie the mission of the Church to the Lord’s promises to Abraham and to Israel’s mission. In verse 9 Paul quotes Psalm 18:49. This is the Psalmist celebrating the victory that God had given him—one that even the Gentiles would take note of.

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.”

And next Paul quotes Moses in Deuteronomy as he calls the nations to rejoice along with Israel over the victory of God:

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.”

And, similarly, Psalm 117:1

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.”

And he ends with Isaiah 11:10:

“The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.”

The root of Jesse—remember we talked about the branch Sunday before last—the Messiah will not only set Israel to rights and rule over the Gentiles, but he will do it in such a way that he will become their hope as well. Paul is showing that all along, ever since Abraham, God’s purpose was to work through Israel, not just for the sake of Israel, but for the sake of whole world. Jesus became a servant of the circumcised, so that the watching gentiles would glorify God and be drawn to him in faith. Jesus has done

his part. Now the Church is called to do hers—to proclaim to Jews and Gentiles alike what the God of Israel has done through Jesus.

Paul saw an urgency in this calling and we get a sense of why in our Gospel. Today’s Gospel is taken from Luke 21, from what’s often called Jesus’ “Olivet Discourse”—a talk Jesus had with his disciples near the end of his ministry in which he told them about the coming judgement on Jerusalem and on unrepentant Israel. Here’s what Jesus says:

“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. (St. Luke 21:25-26)

In the verses just prior, Jesus gives us the setting. Armies have surrounded Jerusalem and the city will be trampled underfoot. In our verses here he draws on the language of the Old Testament prophets to describe the turmoil of those days. Isaiah, for example, wrote of the judgement that was to come on Babylon, saying that the “the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light” (13:10). Ezekiel uses the same kind of language to describe the judgement that was coming on Egypt (32:7) and Joel to describe the calamity that was coming to Jerusalem in its destruction by Babylon (2:10). This is apocalyptic language meant to give a sense of things falling apart. The Lord holds creation together in his hands, he sustains it all, but in his judgement it’s as though he’s withdrawn his hands, creation comes apart and chaos takes over. It makes sense. Those who reject the Lord get a taste of what it’s like to live without him.

Continuing to draw on the language of the prophets, Jesus goes on:

And 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, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:27-28)

Jesus takes this language straight from Daniel 7:13. The son of man—the one who represents Israel, the Messiah whom the people rejected and crucified, the Messiah for whom the little community of Jewish Christians has been persecuted—will come in the clouds with power and glory. This is not an image of Jesus’ final return at the end of the age. It can’t be, as we’ll see just a few verses on, because it’s already happened. No, the passage Jesus draws on in Daniel describes the son of man, not coming on the clouds to the earth, but ascending on the clouds to the Ancient of Days, to receive “dominion and glory and a kingdom” (7:14). What Jesus is describing is his own vindication as Messiah and the vindication of those who have believed in him, despite the persecution of their fellow Jews. He goes on in verses 29-33:

And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Jesus’ friends will follow in his footsteps as they face rejection and persecution. He has tasked them with proclaiming the good news about him in Jerusalem and Judea and to the whole world. Like the old prophets, their task is to issue the royal summons, calling scattered Israel to the King. Many will hear the summons and believe, but they will face persecution and death at the hands of their brethren who reject the Messiah. But both Jesus and his people will be vindicated when unbelieving Israel faces judgement. And Jesus gives them hope and a sense of urgency. This time of awful persecution will not last

forever. Within their generation it will come to an end. But that also means that the clock is running on their mission to carry the gospel to their fellow Jews. This is why St. Paul urged his readers in last Sunday's Epistle to wake up and to put on the armour of light. The night is far gone and the day is at hand.

Jesus' final words in the Gospel bring us back full circle to the petition of our Collect. Jesus assures his disciples that his words will not pass away. Specifically, he's assuring them that what he's said will happen within their lifetime will indeed happen. And, of course, from our perspective we can look back to the events leading up to Jerusalem's destruction in A.D. 70 and see that God is, indeed, faithful and that his word is true.

But the destruction of Jerusalem and the vindication of Jesus' people in that time isn't the end of the story. It took the other disciples time to see that there was more to the fulfilment of Israel's story, but Paul had worked this part out early on as we see in our Epistle. The Lord did not save the faithful remnant of Israel for their sake alone. Israel's calling was always to be a light to the Gentiles. Israel's calling was always to carry the Lord's salvation to the nations. And so in the events of A.D. 70, we see again the faithfulness of God in the vindication of Jesus the Messiah and of his people, and we see another horizon, one in which the gospel goes out from Jerusalem and Judaea to Samaria and eventually to the whole world, not only summoning the scattered sheep of Israel, but drawing in the nations as they see the faithfulness of God and come to him in faith to give him glory. And here we have no timeline, no expiration date. We have only the promise that one day the knowledge of the glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. There will be ups and downs as history shows, but the kingdom of Jesus will go marching on until, empowered by the Spirit, the Church fulfils her gospel mission. It may be a thousand years or a hundred thousand years, but we can trust that as God has been faithful in the past, he will be faithful to the very end. Our hope is sure and

certain because his word tells us so. And in that, Brothers and Sisters, we ought to find exhortation to be faithful ourselves to live and to proclaim the gospel boldly and courageously until our Lord returns.

Let's pray: Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*