



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Eighth Sunday after Trinity: Heirs with the Messiah Romans 8:12-17 & St. Matthew 7:15-21 Fr. William Klock

July 30, 2023

“Beware false prophets!” Jesus warns his disciples in our Gospel today. This got me thinking about my first year here at Living Word. The Foursquare church put on a big event and brought in a speaker from out of town and he opened the event with what people called a “prophetic word” and what lots of people soon after were calling “The Comox Valley Prophecy”. A lot of people got really excited about it and so I found it on the Internet and watched an hour of complete and utter nonsense. This man claimed to be speaking words that were given to him directly by God, but it was all Word-Faith, Prosperity gospel heresy. Taking Isaiah 61 completely out of context, he proclaimed that the coming year would be the year of the Lord’s favour and that the churches would suddenly be bursting at the seams, that all the businesses in town would prosper and be rolling in profits, and that no one would die for the next year. It got people in a lot of local churches really excited, but what was troubling was that they weren’t excited about the gospel or about Jesus. It didn’t get them fired up to go out and to proclaim the good news that he was crucified, is risen, and is Lord. It didn’t get anyone on their knees in repentance, let alone going out and calling others to repent. Instead, it got groups of people going out to local business to “declare” that they would prosper that year. False prophecy and false teaching spilled over into more false prophecy and false teaching.

Now, this was all a new phenomenon to me. I’d never been exposed to that

kind of thing and I struggled to find the appeal in it and then I struggled even more to understand why people continued to find it appealing. It was troubling enough to me that a lot of people didn’t recognise the false teaching and the false gospel, but once the prophecies about prosperity and, especially, about no one dying failed to pan out... People died. People in that very church died. And some of those businesses didn’t just struggle that year, some of them failed. And the churches weren’t bursting at the seams. And as much as this guy opened by saying this was a special message God had given him for the Comox Valley, a little searching with Google showed that he gave exactly the same “special” message almost everywhere he was asked to speak, from California to South Africa. But none of this seemed to phase most people. They got charged up about it for a couple of months and then forgot about it as they moved onto the next exciting thing to catch their attention and the next “prophet” who said things they wanted to hear. And that’s just it. That’s the danger of false prophets. They tell people what they want to hear. As Jeremiah warned, they declare “Peace! Peace! When there is no peace.” While the true prophet is warning of coming judgement and calling people to repentance, the false prophets are tickling itching ears and telling everyone that everything is fine and that they’re on the right track. Judgement is coming, but the false prophets instead proclaim riches and health and all sorts of warm fuzzies. The true prophet calls people to follow him through the narrow gate and to follow the difficult and narrow path that leads to life, while the false prophet leads people down the wide and easy way that leads to complacency and eventually to destruction. False prophets tell people what they want to hear. Ed Stetzer, a prominent missiologist, says, “If you want people to like you, don’t become a pastor; sell ice cream.” There’s an even better way to get people to like you—and to get rich to boot: Become a false prophet.

Again, look at Matthew 7, beginning at verse 15:

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Remember the context in which Jesus was speaking to these people. It’s good that we want to understand how to apply Jesus’ words to our own situation, but we often have a bad habit of short-circuiting the process by ignoring the original context. We miss things—and sometimes we get things wrong—when we do that. So remember that Jesus was saying these things to fellow Jews. And Jesus has a very specific place and part in the story of the God of Israel and his people.

Remember Israel’s calling and mission. God’s creation was a disaster and it all went wrong because human beings rebelled against him. Even wiping out the entire human race and starting over with the one, last righteous man and his family didn’t solve the problem. So in that dark world the Lord called Abraham out of the nations. And he made himself known to Abraham and most of all he showed Abraham his goodness and his faithfulness so that Abraham could be a witness to that goodness and faithfulness. And the Lord made Abraham into a people, a nation, and he did the same with them. Over and over he showed them his goodness and

his faithfulness. He made them promises and then he did what he said. When they were slaves in Egypt, he rescued them, he cared for them in the wilderness, and he led them into the promised land and gave them wells they hadn't dug and cities they hadn't built. He gave them his law, he gave them a king, and most importantly he lived in their midst. The other nations had temples and in those temples were idols of wood or gold or stone that were blind, deaf, dumb, and powerless. But in the midst of Israel was the tabernacle where the glory of the Lord rested on the ark of the covenant. A real, living God who was good and who was faithful and proved it to his own people before the watching eyes of the world.

And that's just it. Israel was to be a witness to the nations. The nations were supposed to see the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord reflected in the corporate life of his people. As they lived in his presence and as they trusted in him. And Israel, to whom the Lord had given his law, they were supposed to be the righteous benchmark by which he would one day judge the nations when he came to put an end to their wickedness and to set his world to rights.

But over and over Israel failed to be that witness and to be that benchmark. The Lord sent prophets to call his people to repentance, but they rejected his prophets. Sometimes they even killed them. Instead, they listened to false prophets who told them everything was fine. The Lord even sent his people into exile. The promised land was his. It was holy. And if they weren't going to be holy too, then they could not live in his land or in his presence. First the northern tribes were conquered and scattered by the Assyrians and then the southern tribes were conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem and the temple were utterly destroyed and the people were taken off in captivity to live in a foreign, pagan land. The Lord was faithful to his promises

when he disciplined his people, and, again, he was faithful to his promises when he returned them to the land. But the people were still fickle. They still served him with divided loyalties.

And so, after a long string of prophets whom the people rejected, the Lord finally sent his own son. He sent his son to proclaim his soon-to-come judgement on Israel and to call his people to repentance. But he also sent his son to be the faithful Israelite, the Israelite who would single-mindedly serve the him, the Israelite who would obey the law, the Israelite who would be that holy and righteous benchmark, the Israelite who would ultimately die the death that his sinful people deserved and become a sacrifice for their sins.

The key point here with regard to today's Gospel is that Jesus came to announce that the Lord was about to judge his people and to call them to repentance. Those who refused to repent—those who listened to the false prophets, who carried on down the easy, wide way, would face death and destruction in a generation. And with that announcement came a call to repentance. There was a narrow way that would lead through that judgement to life. It wasn't an easy way. Just as Jesus was mocked and rejected and eventually put to death, so those who repented and followed him would walk a similar path. At the beginning of this same Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said to them, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely *on my account*. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." On the other side of that rejection was life—life in a new people of God who would be filled with his own Spirit and who, because of that, would have a righteousness greater than the Pharisees. They would finally be the people who would be faithful to the Lord and, most of all, in whom the nations

would see the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord, so that they would come in faith to bring him glory. The nations would see reflected in this new Israel the glory of a god unlike any of the gods they had ever known and so God's glory would spread and his new creation would grow. And all those who found themselves in Jesus the Messiah would find this gift of the Spirit a foretaste, a down-payment on that day when the gospel has done its work, when the glory of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea, and when death itself is finally defeated. On that day God will raise them all to new life, just as he had raised Jesus, and they will live forever in his presence in a world set to rights once and for all.

But that narrow way in the meantime was going to be hard. It wasn't just the rejection of their friends and families. False prophets would call them away from it. And so Jesus warned them: Look for good fruit. That's just what Jesus was calling his people to bear. Pay attention, he's saying, to the ones you listen to. If they're not bearing good fruit themselves, how do you think they'll encourage you to bear good fruit? The prophets reflected the state of the nation. In a few short years judgement would fall on Jerusalem and people would be crying out to the Lord for deliverance. But the Lord knows his own by their fruit and these had borne none, because they'd rejected Jesus and instead listened to fruitless prophets. In contrast, Jesus says, "Those who do the will of my Father in heaven"—those who have found their identity in me and have been filled with the Spirit—they're the ones who will fulfil the law and, because of that, because of the fruit the Spirit causes them to bear, they'll be known by the Father.

This is where Paul picks up in our Epistle from Romans 8. Jesus knew that his people would face rejection and opposition and persecution—even

martyrdom—for the sake of following him. He knew they would be confronted by false prophets who would tell them that everything was fine and that they were foolish for following Jesus. And Paul was shepherding people in very similar situations. He saw fellow Jewish believers, even out in the gentile world, being hassled and harassed by their fellow Jews for the sake of their faith in Jesus. Sometimes their fellow Jews would even be so angry with them that they'd rat them out to the Roman authorities for being disloyal citizens of the empire. But, too, the people in these churches in places like Rome or Asia Minor faced harassment from their pagan neighbours and even from the civil and religious authorities—and in their world those were often the same people. At the time Paul wrote this in the 50s, there wasn't any official persecution of Christians by the Romans, but Paul could see that it was eventually going to come. People don't like it when you expose their sin and warn of coming judgement. The Jews didn't like it when Jesus did it. The Jews didn't like it when their fellow Jewish Christians did it. And Paul, seeing it on a small scale already, knew that the gentiles wouldn't like it when it was their turn. Caesar definitely wouldn't like it. When persecution came, it would be easy for believers to turn away from Jesus because of their fear. And there would be false prophets proclaiming to the churches that everything was fine, that compromise was okay—like the Judaisers in Galatians or the Nicolaitans in Revelation.

So Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome to stand firm. The Lord has called them and made them his witnesses and they have no reason to fear. Look again at verses 17-21:

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of

the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with the Messiah, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

"Look," Paul is saying, "Israel was captive to the flesh. They had God's good law to live by, but it was written on tablets of stone and their hearts were full of the same poison as the hearts of the rest of the human race. The Lord had poured out his love on them and they should have loved him wholeheartedly in return, but their hearts were set on sin and on self—and so they could never return the Lord's love. Not truly. They had—and their descendants still have – reason to fear. The Lord will judge their unfaithfulness." But, says Paul, "*You* are different. Not only have you been forgiven through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, but God has poured his own Spirit into you and that makes all the difference. The Spirit renews your minds and regenerates your heart. The law that was once written on stone—the law that we sum up in those words about loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbour as yourself—the Spirit writes that law on our hearts. If we are in Jesus the Messiah, the law is no longer a stone tablet we look at and say, 'I wish I could do that.' Now it's written on our hearts. It's our desire. It's what we value, because of the Spirit." Paul says that we still have to put to death our old ways, but it's this gift of God's own Spirit that makes it possible. And it's always good to remember that the Lord does not give his gifts in vain.

Brothers and Sisters, it's good at this

point to pause and let this sink in. I think we often forget that there's a bigger purpose behind all of this. We know that sin is wrong. We know that through Jesus our sins are forgiven. We know that the Spirit turns our hearts away from sin to righteousness. We know that we're supposed to put away the old man and put on the new and live in the Spirit. But I think we sometimes forget that righteousness isn't an end in itself. Remember the story. Remember why God created a people for himself in the first place. Think of Abraham in the midst of that big, dark world lost in sin and with no knowledge of the Lord. Abraham and his family were to be witnesses to the Lord—to make him known, to be light in the darkness, to show that the Lord is good and faithful, different from the gods of the pagans, and worthy of the worship of the nations. And this people, too, was to be the benchmark by which the nations were one day to be judged. The old Israel failed and so God gave Jesus and the Spirit to create a new Israel—a new people to be both a light to the nations and the righteous benchmark by which they will one day be judged. God's people have always had this dual ministry to the word—to be both a priestly and prophetic people. As priests we mediate the presence and knowledge of God to the nations and as prophets we stand as—or we *should* stand—as God's benchmark of righteousness, calling the nations to repentance and showing forth his standard—showing the world what humanity was created to be.

If that seems like a lot. If it seems like an impossibly high calling, Paul goes on saying that we were once slaves to sin, but through Jesus and the Spirit we have been set free and adopted as sons of God. Brothers and Sisters, by the Spirit we are incorporated into the story of Jesus the Messiah. Because we have the Spirit, we belong to him. The Messiah is in us. And if we go back a few verses, Paul tells us that the God who "raised Jesus the Messiah from the dead will also give life to [our] mortal bodies through his

Spirit who dwells in [us].” I think this part of Romans is usually read as if Paul is talking about conversion, but it’s really much deeper than that. Paul is talking about how believers are taken up into the story of Jesus and participate in his suffering and resurrection. To be filled with the Spirit is to be absolutely and completely assured that one day the Lord will raise our mortal (and in some cases martyred) bodies from the dead, just as he raised Jesus from the dead. This is the root of faith. This is what those Christians in Rome needed to remember and believe with all their hearts when persecution and tribulation came.

And if they’ll do that—in the power of the Spirit—Paul says they will become “sons of God”. It’s about participation in the story and life of Jesus as adopted sons of God—it’s especially powerful when we let Paul’s words stand without changing it to sons *and daughters* or to children of God. He writes “sons of God” for a reason, just as he writes about crying out “Abba, Father” for a reason. Both make it clear he’s talking about our being incorporated into Jesus the Messiah and into his story. Think back to Jesus crying out to his Father in Gethsemane the night before he was crucified. Jesus’ people cry with him, “Abba, Father”. The Lord is no distant god. Brothers and Sisters, because we are in his Son by faith, we too are his sons and daughters and have the privilege to cry out to him as Father just as Jesus did. And Paul recalls that prayer in the garden for a reason. That was Jesus’ prayer to the Father, his prayer as he was about to face his own death, it was his prayer that his Father would take that horrible cup from him. But it was also a prayer of faith as he submitted himself to his Father’s plan. We know that Paul is saying to the Romans that when that same cup of persecution and maybe even martyrdom comes to them, they can cry out to the Father with the same confidence that Jesus did, they can submit in faith to his plan the same

way Jesus did, and they can know that the Father holds them in his hands the same way he held Jesus. And, I think most important, they can expect that the Father will vindicate them the same way he vindicated Jesus. They can know that one day the Father will raise them from the dead.

If they will let themselves be taken up in the story of Jesus the Messiah—something they can’t do on their own power, but they can in the power of the Spirit—if they suffering with the Messiah and walk his narrow and difficult path, they will be heirs with him—his inheritance, his glory will be theirs.

Brothers and Sisters, those first Christians, whether they were in Jerusalem and facing the wrath of their fellow Jews or whether they were in Rome facing the wrath of the pagans—in a few years facing the wrath of the Emperor Nero who would throw them to lions or burn them alive—Paul reminds them who they are in Jesus and the Spirit. They are the people of God, a people washed clean by the blood of Jesus and a people made righteous by the Spirit, a people called to be prophets and priests. Their calling was to stand before the tsunami of the world’s wrath calling sinful men and women to repentance, while mediating the loving grace of God—proclaiming the good news that Jesus has died, that he is risen, and that life, that participation in God’s new creation can be known through him.

Brothers and Sisters, judgement fell on Jerusalem and the Lord proved himself faithful to his promises as he delivered the church there from destruction. And the gospel went out to the Greeks and Romans and the Lord showed himself faithful again. Through the gospel and through the faithful witness of his people, an entire empire believed. With the biblical witness itself and with that history behind us, we have every reason to trust Jesus and the Spirit ourselves.

We now live on the other side of Christendom. We don’t know what will happen. The gospel marches on in other parts of the world, but in ours, darkness is creeping back in. I doubt that we will know martyrdom the way Paul and so many of those First Century believers did, but we will know in some way the wrath of the world as we stand as prophets and priests, confronting a rebellious world. Stand firm. Do not listen to the false prophets who call for compromise and for the easy way. Do not fear the wrath of the world, for we are in Jesus the Messiah and the Spirit has united us with him. We are sons and daughters of the Father and no matter how bad things get, we can cry out with Jesus, “Abba, Father!” and know that he hears us. He gave his Son for our sake, why would we think he would abandon us now? And because we are united with the risen Jesus, because we are sons and daughters of God, we know that on the other side of all our troubles and sorrows lies our inheritance—as we confess in the Creed, the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Let’s pray: Father, through the redeeming death and resurrection of your Son and through the regenerating work of your Spirit, you have made us your people. You have given us the task to stand as both prophets and priests, confronting this rebellious world and mediating your grace. Strengthen us, we pray, that we might stand firm in this calling no matter what trials and tribulations we may face. Make us new by your Spirit, fill us with your grace, and remind us that we share in the inheritance of your Son, who has been raised from the dead, that we might confront temptation and fear with a faith confident in your faithfulness. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.