

Sunday's Lectionary Texts

Jeremiah 33: 14 – 16

Psalm 25: 1 – 10

1 Thessalonians 3: 9 – 13

Luke 21: 25 – 36

Notes on the Old Testament Lesson

Our Lectionary texts for this first Sunday of Advent call our attention to the coming of the Messiah; both in historical terms – the birth of Jesus – and in personal terms; how we observe these Advent and Christmas seasons.

Notice that verse 14 refers to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Remember that after Solomon's death, the land of Israel was divided into two kingdoms: Israel (or Samaria) in the north and Judah in the south. At the time that the book of Jeremiah was written, the northern kingdom had been destroyed a century earlier. Yet Jeremiah says that the Lord's promise will be kept to both kingdoms. (The phrase "house of" refers to the dynasties that ruled the countries. The fact that the northern kingdom had several different dynasties makes Jeremiah's promise even more remarkable.) The Lord's promise in this passage is a promise of restoration. Not only the kingdom of Judah, in which Jeremiah lived, would be restored, but the kingdom of Israel, which had been destroyed and its inhabitants scattered, would be restored as well.

It is the fifteenth verse that confirms that this passage is a messianic prophecy. Any reference to a "Branch" refers to the branch from the house of David, or the Messiah. Jeremiah seems to use the term as a proper name for the Messiah (see Jeremiah 3: 8). In the sixteenth verse, Jeremiah teaches us a key aspect of the coming Messiah. He will establish a righteousness that is not man's but the Lord's. Even from the earliest prophecies, it is plain that the Messiah will live and teach that God's ways are not man's ways.

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

In this passage, Jesus describes the need for watchfulness and for the disciple to be alert. While traditionally taken to refer to the Second Coming, this passage also has great meaning for the Advent season. The conditions described by Jesus in verses 25 – 26 constantly exist around us. Nations are always at war with each other and natural disasters bring death and destruction on a regular basis. (As I write these words, I am in New Orleans for the annual meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature. This city still bears the scars inflicted by Hurricane Katrina four years ago and shudders at the thought of what future hurricanes may bring.)

The message is for us to be always ready to encounter the Lord; whether in a dramatic Second Coming, at the time when we cross from this side of eternity to the next, in a powerful moment of worship, or at the side of a lowly manger. Advent is a time that reminds us to always be ready to meet God, no matter the manner or circumstances of that meeting.