

Two Visions

As we come to the end of one liturgical year where our final Sunday is always known as Christ the King Sunday and celebrates the reign of Jesus Christ we have some readings before us which will pointedly remind us what all the retail trappings anticipating the Christmas birth tend to overlook, or ignore. The event we soon begin anticipating is that birth as an infant into a peasant family, our Lord. In the glow of candles and manger scenes about how the life that enters into our world we tend to ignore how it will end and the reason for it. Even in the manger scene which we have conflated with the Magi and Shepherds joining the gathering, the reality of the cross and the cost of it are present. Today our Hebrew Scripture reading paints a beautiful, bright, wonderful description of what Christ's reign, the presence of God's kingdom among us will bring while the gospel reading from Luke is one of the few apocalyptic verses found in the gospel narratives. These readings seem to come from opposite ends of the message spectrum, yet within them there is actually a message for us today that is not so different from the message that was needed and given to those who heard these words for the first time. This section of Isaiah was written to people who had returned from exile in Babylon expecting to find the "new order God had created for them". This "new" creation meant to them the return of the Davidic monarchy" and an independent Israel. They first believed the delay was caused by their failure to rebuild the Temple; then that some had married those who had remained in the Promised Land or who had come as conquerors so they shunned and exiled them. Yet despite their building project and efforts to purify the lineage of worshippers, the reality of their lives was harsh. Poverty and death remained the common experience for them those who had remained, those who returned did not find their world unchanged as well. Some began to turn away from worship of God to the worship of the Canaanite gods doubting God's presence and power. In today's passage from Isaiah 65 we are given a utopian vision which was presented earlier to people still living in exile within Isaiah when the wolf, lamb, lion and ox again appear as a metaphor for what God would create for them; a collection of creatures evoking the peaceable kingdom presented first in Isaiah 11. A heightened emphasis on erstwhile predators and prey feeding together sets before us a contrast at the end of the verse 25 which states "but the serpent—its food shall be dust!" That line of three simple but devastating words in Hebrew brings the scene from the Garden of Eden fully into focus reminding us of God's curses on the serpent as well as Adam and Eve. Here, the primeval ancestors' sorrows of pain, death and toil will be transformed into the joy of blessed offspring and enduring enjoyment of the fruit of human labor, but the curse on the serpent is reaffirmed. The serpent in the future will remain subjugated, so this new blessedness will never again face threats. The promise here is that Israel's glorious restoration will be of Edenic proportions and cosmic significance. Zion will be at the center of the "new heaven and new earth" that God is creating; God will reside there as Israel will be healed and cherished within the very heart of God's delight. Good news indeed as God proclaims "they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain." Believers in this picture are left longing for that place of unending reconciliation and joy. This passage also depicts this as a time of joy and rejoicing because all those sources of pain and suffering will now be banished; it will be a time of prosperity. This poem points to the reality behind worship, and creates a picture of what that virtual world looks like as God creates a new reality. In Scriptures, only God can create and the verb forms

contained in this passage describe God's creating as God's on-going activity. That ideal world is being created "new" every day. God's creative work turns the profane world of the city into holy space—God's territory from which divine blessings radiate out into the world and the cosmos; a world of harmony, prosperity, and joy. In today's world, this vision is sometimes replaced by what is called the "prosperity gospel", the idea that if we praise God and do the right things, God will reward us individually with prosperity. Too often, though, our understanding of prosperity means money and personal wealth and power for us as individuals. The picture given to us in Isaiah is not one of personal wealth. It is a picture of community harmony, of community wide acceptance and reconciliation among all members living there. And that community is described in the broadest of terms: it includes even those things that can harm us. The blessings are not demonstrated by the wealth of the elite, there is no prosperous king in this picture. God's blessings are seen when the poorest and most at risk among us, the most vulnerable of all among us live to a ripe old age enjoying abundance, without fear or anxiety. This picture brings to mind a series of "what ifs" about our world...what would our world look like without hunger, without homelessness, without the lack of adequate medical care for all. Isaiah is trying to show us that this is what our worship should invite us to imagine...and then to work toward. Within Israel, the returned and the remnant left behind are trying to forming one community again, trying to put conflict and trauma behind them. They are focusing not on the world as it is, but as it should be. It seems part of the solution is that "the former things will not be remembered or come to mind." The trauma of the exile is to be put in the past. The key to this passage is the lack of vengeance as the past will not be used to divide. Despite the aptness of the prophet Isaiah's words to our Christian theology, it is highly doubtful the prophet who uttered these words had Jesus in mind as he wrote. This Isaianic seer was envisioning an unimaginable future while imagining it all too vividly and insisting that it was on the way. But the words fly far beyond any specific historical context. In this imagined future the new will not be so new as to be unrecognizable—this world will still be there but the people will be God's delight rather than a people bent on running from God as fast as they can; a transformed people who will transform their world. This transformed new cosmos is both like and unlike the one we know. We recognize the people and the animals, the cycles of birth and death, the future joy amid the current bouts of oppression and sorrow. It is easy to romanticize all this during the Christmas Season but what Isaiah is telling us is that the cosmos needs transformation from top to bottom, from people to animals, from hills to valleys, and God is in the business of transformation. And God promises us that is what we are going to get. If Jesus' birth means anything, it means that, namely a transformed cosmos, not more or brighter lights on a tree or bigger presents under it. It means we begin looking to see the fulfillment of the prayer we pray every Sunday that God's kingdom will come to earth. We say we want God to come now and reign over us, we want God to rule in our lives. We want no longer to rely on our own resources to make our own way in the world. But sometimes are we being honest in what we are saying? Are we secretly saying, "But not today because we rather like the way we are directing things at the moment, God." At the moment our life is good, so do we want to give up what we have? Many of the parables Jesus has taught as he made his way to Jerusalem stress the importance of priorities held as the key to the relationship with God. Just before the gospel reading, Jesus is standing in the Temple courtyard. He has remained there after his dramatic entrance and overturning of the

moneychangers tables. As he watches the people coming in and bringing their offerings he makes note of a widow who gives all that she has—two mites. Jesus comments on her offering saying it is more than all the offerings of the rich people who put their gifts into the treasury. Some around him were speaking about the temple itself; about its beauty and adornment. Jesus' comment to this praise of the building is: "As for these things you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Those to whom he said this, then asked when will that happen, and what signs will happen to indicate this is about to occur. This exchange provides the backdrop for the apocalyptic verses that follow. When Luke was written, the temple had already been destroyed by the Roman army as well as much of Jerusalem. While the tone of this text is easily used to describe "end of the world" scenarios, but since the world has continued for over two thousand years since then with all the events mentioned happening again and again, not to mention Jesus' own statements that only God the Father knows the timing for that end—we need to look beyond the easy and obvious to see what Jesus was telling and asking of those who followed him. Within his answer three kinds of calamities are listed: the destruction of the temple in verses 5 and 6, natural disasters in verses 7-11 and the coming persecution of Christians by their enemies in verses 12-19. All three of the synoptic gospels contain this prediction of the Temple's destruction. Begun in 19 BC and not yet completed until 64 AD, it was razed by the Roman army six years after it was completed during the First Jewish Revolt. It was considered one of the most beautiful buildings in the Roman Empire. As God's house, its destruction would seem to be the end of the world in the minds of the people. When Luke wrote this "prediction", the Temple had already been destroyed so Luke was confirming a known fact. This serves as affirmation of Jesus' words. The particular historic events of earthquake, wars and famines mentioned are hard to pin point. That region was and still is prone to earthquakes, wars and famines. These events happen in every place and time in human history; they are difficult to prepare for. The third kind of calamity named what early Christians experienced at the hands of both rulers of synagogue and state. These verses are meant to provide consolation and strengthen the believers facing them. We can now partially prepare for some of these kinds of historical and natural disasters and sufferings. Historical conditions can be analyzed and we can try to learn from the mistakes of the past. Meteorologists can warn us of coming tornadoes, hurricanes and even earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Still, the author of Ecclesiastes was correct in pointing out the general truth that "no one can anticipate the time of disaster" at least not completely. So we can live our lives in perpetual dread, but that is not the same as preparation. The best way to prepare for any calamity that could happen at any time is to always be looking for Christ's presence and activity in every person and circumstance. When we do that, we are following Jesus' advice as transmitted by Luke in this passage: we resist following false teachers and leaders as we seek if they mirror Christ's presence in what they say and do. We discern the presence of God in Christ with us in our hardships and witness to others of the strength and comfort found there. We practice faithful living and searching the scriptures so that the vocabulary of faith will not desert us when the time comes to speak up for what we believe. And we hold on to the truth and promise given, taking comfort in the presence of God who will never leave us or forsake us. That first vision describes a reality we have a difficult time seeing as we live in this world that is so broken, but the second vision presented by Jesus can be a guide for us to live into that reality

that is not yet fully among us but comes nearer when we seek to follow where Christ would lead us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.