



BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25 (24); 1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2; Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars

Luke 21:25 [Jesus said:] “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. 26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

21:29 *Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

Luke 21:34 “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, 35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Advent is a clarion call to renew once more our engagement with the Good News, in a conscious and personal fashion. The two Gospel passages which open Advent capture two sides of the Christian vision. Vv. 25-28, the vision of the end, are a re-reading of traditional material from Mark 13, which was written during a time of persecution. Behind the dramatic—lurid?—language lies a foundational faith conviction: there is a pattern and a purpose to life. The all-encompassing immediacy of the times,

with the impression of their being all there is, is challenged by Christian faith and hope. The second paragraph, vv. 34-36, responds to the spontaneous question, if this is the case, then how should we act in the present? The answer is two-fold: watchfulness and prayer. (The parable of the fig tree, which bridges the passages, is not given in the lectionary.)

Broadly speaking, Luke portrays Jesus as a prophet, part of whose prophecy has already come to pass and part remains to be fulfilled. The last verse is very good news: the coming of the Son of Man contains no fears for those faithful to prayer, in faith and in hope.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Luke 21:26 is an allusion: “For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land.” (Hag 2:6)

Luke 21:27 is a citation: “As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him.” (Dan 7:13)

Luke 21:35 is an allusion: “Terror, and the pit, and the snare are upon you, O inhabitant of the earth!” (Isa 24:17)

KIND OF WRITING

As noted elsewhere, this is “apocalyptic”, a particular kind of writing which flourished from about 200 BC onwards in Jewish contexts. The major apocalypses in the Bible are the Daniel and Revelation. Mark 13 is known as the Little Apocalypse and forms the basis for the Lucan text here.

The setting for apocalyptic is usually some situation of threat or persecution, where the very basis of the faith is under pressure. People are then asking “where is God in all this?” Apocalyptic writing

Thought for the day

If you were to wish people a happy new year today, they would in all probability find it awkward. Nevertheless, we do start a new Christian year with the season of Advent. The different seasons reminds of important aspects of being Christian, one of which is the conviction that we may always begin again and start new. Last Sunday, we looked back and today we look forward: what are *my* hopes for the coming Christian year? How am I now? How would like to be, as a person of faith, this time next year? What steps will I take to make that a reality?

Prayer

O God, we believe that your mercies are new every morning and that your faithfulness is abundant. Come to our help as we start afresh our path of discipleship in this season of longing.

tries to help people understand the quality of the times and how they should act accordingly. Apocalyptic writing is usually heavily symbolic and esoteric. The basic message is twofold: there is a purpose in all this and we are asked practice endurance, i.e. faith and hope.

Luke’s end-time discourse (21:5-37) unfolds in three distinct moments.

- 1^a The Fall of the Temple (21:5-11)
- 2 The time before the Fall of the Temple (21:12-19 – an excursus)
- 1^b The Fall of the Temple (21:20-24)
- 3 The Days of the Son of Man (21:25-37)

Our excerpt, therefore, comes from the very last part of the discourse. For the readers of Luke, Parts 1 and 2 are already past (Jerusalem has fallen etc.). The factual fulfilment of the prediction strengthens our faith in Jesus as a prophet as we listen to the words about the end of time. There is a literary pattern across 21:5-37:

- A The time of the eschaton, warning not to be misled (vv. 8- 9)
- B Political upheavals (v. 10)

C Cosmic disturbances (v. 11)

D The time of testimony (which comes before all this) (vv. 12- 19)

B* Political upheavals (of which the fall of Jerusalem is a part) (vv. 20- 24)

C* Cosmic disturbances (vv. 25- 26)

A* The time of the eschaton, warning to be ready (vv. 27- 36)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

The sense of high expectation for an end time intervention by God is found widely in the New Testament. For instance, the very preaching of Jesus himself would be an example: ‘But he said to them, ‘I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.’” (Luke 4:43)

Luke 21:25-28 is based on Mark 13:24-27; Luke 21:34-36 has no parallel elsewhere in the Gospels.

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. (Mark 13:24-27)

ST PAUL

Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word. (2 Th 2:16-17)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

When reading this material there are four levels to be distinguished: (i) what really happened; (ii) how this was interpreted in earliest Christianity; (iii) the continuing interpretation in Mark and Q; (iv) Luke’s own interpretation of the preceding traditions. Luke’s own reception suggests the following parameters for reading:

- History has an end and a purpose.
- The first generations of Christians read the terrible events of their day (e.g. the Jewish War, the destruction of Jerusalem) as signs of the end; however, this was not the case, as it turned out.
- The consequent delay and reinterpretation is no excuse for complacency; courageous witness during the time of

mission is the call of all believers.

Verse 25 The discourse broadens out from Jerusalem with the expression “signs” and the use of “earth” and “nations”. Here, the Marcan tradition, which saw particular, historical events as the sign of the end, is adjusted to point to cosmic signs, visible to all.

Verse 26 The text moves from celestial signs to the reactions of those still alive, vividly portrayed. There is no mistaking the “shock and awe” of the end. Notice again the mention of “world”

Verse 27 This is a direct citation of Daniel 7:13. Luke has prepared the readers for this—see 9:26; 11:30; 12:8, 40; 17:22, 24, 26, 30; 18:8. The Son of Man is coming not with violence and vengeance; instead, it will be the very same Jesus whom we know from Luke’s portrait, full of compassion and love. The proper preparation for his return is not speculation about the end, but simply repentance and loving service.

Verse 28 At this point, Luke omits Mark: “Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mark 13:27) and replaces that verse with fitting words of encouragement.

Verses 29-30 He means here that the signs will be unmistakable and there will not need for speculation or speculative interpreters.

Verse 31 This is the clear promise that there will indeed be an end, when God brings history to a close.

Verses 32 Luke takes v. 32 from Mark and he already knows that, at a literal level, it had not happened. Luke has most likely changed the reference to the very last generation, the generation which will not have passed away.

Verse 33 Jesus is God’s ultimate spokesman and his word, like God’s word in the Hebrew Bible, abides (Is 40:8; Ps 119:89, 160; *The sum of your word is truth; and every one of your righteous ordinances endures forever.* (Psa 119:160)

Verse 34 “Be on your guard” is a theme in Luke (12:1; 17:3; 20:46). He is really struggling against a relaxed complacency now that the end is not immediate. Luke alone mentions dissipation etc which brings the discourse very much into present experience. Cf. “So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who

sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night.” (1 Thess 5:6-7)

Verse 35 Luke underscores the universality of these events. Once more, it won’t be simply historical upheavals, but cosmic, universal event.

Verse 36 The verb used here for praying means rather more narrowly interceding, i.e. prayer of petition (5:12; 8:28, 38; 9:38, 40; 10:2; 22:32). Teaching on prayer is a feature of Luke, as is his more frequent portrayal of Jesus at prayer. The discourse ends on a positive and practical note.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. This passage can be taken as a metaphor for personal experiences when it seemed that your world was collapsing around you: plans thwarted, deep disappointment, something out of your control altering the course of your life, etc.? When have such experiences been a prelude to something new? Allow the dramatic language of the passage remind you of this experience, making sure that you recognise the double movement of collapse and liberation.

2. Jesus himself is the model in this gospel story as he taught his disciples the spirituality of ‘waiting in joyful hope’. What difference has watchfulness (in the sense of being watchful in prayer) made to you in facing difficult situations?

3. Advent is a time that calls us to be alert to the signs of the hidden presence of God in our world. What reminds you of this presence of God? Have there been occasions when something woke you up in an unexpected way to the presence of God in the world, e.g. through love, beauty, nature, etc.?

PRAYER

God, our saviour, you utter a word of promise and hope and hasten the day of justice and freedom, yet we live in a world forgetful of your word, our watchfulness dulled by the cares of life. Keep us alert. Make us attentive to your word, ready to look on your Son when he comes with power and great glory. Make us holy and blameless, ready to stand secure when the day of his coming shakes the world with terror.

We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near: your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

May he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless with all his saints

1 Thess 3:12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13 And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

1 Thess 4:1 Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This prayer and exhortation are both very suitable for Advent. The text can be read in relation to the community in Thessalonica at the time of Paul and also in relation to our personal preparation for Christmas.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The context is primarily one of irritation and disappointment. Paul had been to Thessalonica, around AD 49 and have moved on to Athens. While in Athens a cry for help came, but Paul himself did not return to Macedonia. Instead he send Timothy. Upon the latter's return, Paul is aware that there is some bridge building to be done.

Apart from this immediate issue with their founder, the Thessalonians also have a number of questions. How do we live in the hostile environment of the empire and emperor worship? What about the dead? When will the end be?

While almost certainly the first Christian document to come down to us and the first surviving letter of St Paul, 1 Thessalonians is a mature document, reflecting Paul's experience of some fifteen years of proclamation in Syria and Cilicia.

KIND OF WRITING

1 Thessalonians is a letter, using the structural patterns of classical rhetoric.

1:1 Epistolary superscript
1:2-10 Thanksgiving / Introduction
1:9-10 Thesis in three parts

2:1-3:12 Relationship with Paul
4:1-12 Living in love and holiness
4:13-5:11 End-time issues
5:12-27 Exhortation / Conclusion
5:28 Epistolary postscript

The two paragraphs thus straddle two sections of the letter. 1 Thess 3:12-13 concludes the restoration of relationships and foreshadows the topics to come in the next two sections. 1 Thess 4:1-2 serves to open the topic of how to live in love and holiness in a hostile environment.

RELATED PASSAGES

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming. (1 Thess 1:6–10)

Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you, so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one. (1 Thess 4:9–12)

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbour as

yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8–10)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 12 Paul engages his hearers in a prayer, as he concludes the careful restoration of affection between him and the Thessalonian Christians. They had doubted his apparent love for them and now he prays that they may abound in love for each other and for all, not excluding Paul himself. Elsewhere, Paul can evoke his hearers' indebtedness to himself: *Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.* (2 Cor 8:7)

Verse 13 Earlier in the letter, Paul outlined the three topics: relationships, holiness and hope in 1:9-10. He is now about to take up the remaining issues in the next two sections (4:1-12; 4:13-5:11). The mention here resumes the topics after the long and emotionally intense restoration in 2:1-3:12.

Verse 1 It might seem that Paul resembles the preacher here, inserting “finally” long before the end! However, in Greek, *loipon* has a range of meanings: *beyond that, in addition, finally*. “Furthermore” would be a good version in context. The combination of *indicative* (you are doing) with *imperative* (do so more and more) is very Pauline. He affirms before he exhorts—a lesson for us all.

Verse 2 Given the way the lectionary cuts off here, the final sentence feels inevitably incomplete. We wonder what were the instructions and so forth (it turns out that Paul is dealing chiefly with sexual ethics). The *Revised Common Lectionary* does a better job in choosing 1 Thess 3:9-13 as the reading.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Is love really at the centre of my discipleship? How to I live it?
2. Conversion is never done and dusted, but on the contrary the task of a lifetime.

PRAYER

We need, O God, the strength which comes from you if we are to be true followers of Jesus your Son. As we listen to his word, send your Spirit into our hearts that we may believe what we hear and put into practice what we believe and be your children both in name and in fact. Amen.

I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David

Jer. 33:14 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 15 In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 16 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Jeremiah's ministry encompassed the Babylonian Exile. He was a key figure in the interpretation of that disaster and in spite of his reputation ("jeremiads"), he was also part of the awakening of hope. This is reflected in today's reading, promising restoration and reconstruction.

The combination of penetrating blame and uplifting healing may be just what the Irish church stands in need of.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Along with Isaiah and Ezekiel, Jeremiah is one of the major prophets. The book we now have is an extraordinary literary and theological achievement. As we can see below from the structure, the first part of the book re-enacts the dismantling of tribal structures, cultic institutions and symbolic systems. The telling is full of haunting imagery and deep feeling. A whole way of being has simply collapsed. How to cope with the massive wreckage of a cherished world?

The second part of the book is devoted to a deep theology of suffering as the basis for the construction of new possibilities and restoration after the immense suffering of deportation.

Given our situation of cultural "exile" at the moment, we have much to learn from Jeremiah.

The book is structured in two parts as follows:

Jer 1-25: Destruction and loss.
Jer 26-52: Restoration and hope.

Naturally, each part has a complex presentation of texts and there is no need to see the whole book here.

Part II

27:1-29:32: Differing theologies of hope
30:1-33:26 The Book of Hope
34:1-35:19 Teaching the new community
36:1-45:5 Hope amid disaster

46:1-51:64 Hope for the refugees
52:1-34: The restoration of King Jehoichin as a pledge of hope.

Our Advent reading comes from the appropriately entitled *Book of Hope*.

KIND OF WRITING

Jer 33:14-26 is a difficult passage as a whole. It promises a future for both Levitical priests and a Davidic king. A comparable ideology may be found in Sir 45 (below). In both, the covenant with Aaron is given priority over the covenant with David.

Such prioritising tells us a good deal about the writers and issues at the time of writing. However, although the passage as a whole presents challenges, the verses chosen in the lectionary are clear enough.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Therefore a covenant of friendship was established with him, that he should be leader of the sanctuary and of his people, that he and his descendants should have the dignity of the priesthood forever. Just as a covenant was established with David son of Jesse of the tribe of Judah, that the king's heritage passes only from son to son, so the heritage of Aaron is for his descendants alone. (Sirach 45:24-25)

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness." (Jer 23:5-6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 14 The opening words in Hebrew are *Behold, the days are coming*. "Says the Lord" is a weak translation of "nehum adonai" which might be better rendered "I, the LORD, affirm". The promise referred to is in Jer 23:5-6

(above).

Verse 15 The image of the branch (or sprig or twig) is part of a growing number of reference to an ideal rule of the family of David, who would bring justice etc. in a way in which the recent Davidic rulers spectacularly failed. That was why the Lord cut down the tree of David and only a stump was left. God however will fulfil his eternal promise to David's line in 2 Samuel 7 by restoring Israel and raising up a future rule. The key virtues sought in rulers are justice and righteousness.

Verse 16 This is unimaginable during the Exile but promised nevertheless. "Saved" is a good translation; for this nuance elsewhere see Ps 119:117; Prov 28:18 for the verb and Ps 12:6; Job 5:4, 11 for the related noun. The name Joshua / Jesus comes from it and is referred to in Matthew: *She will give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.* (Matt 1:21-22) "The Lord is our righteousness" holds a negative assessment of the traditional monarchy and its failures. The last (failed) king of Judah was ironically named Zedekiah, a name which means "my righteousness is Yahweh."

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The passage from Jeremiah invites us to go back to times in my own life when God has shown himself to be faithful. Such personal experiences can be the ground of hope in later, perhaps more difficult, times. A prayer of hope.
2. In the "righteous branch for David", we as Christians see Jesus as the Messiah and Lord. Where do I see small signs of hope today in the community of faith? A prayer of discernment.
3. Where in my life to I find my security and safety? It might be good to name the people (especially) but also the times and places where support and nourishment came to me. A prayer of gratitude.

PRAYER

God of our longing and God of all hope, in you we trust. When we are lost and do not know where to turn, it is your presence and your word which sustain us.

Help us to to be convinced that nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord, your Son who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72 (71); Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12

READINGS 1 AND 3

The reading from Jeremiah is not apocalyptic and in that sense it does not prepare for the reading. However, the Gospel treats the second coming as a liberation, the completion of salvation, in that sense the first reading can be said to anticipate the third reading. Perhaps in particular the emphasis on integrity is echoed in the dire warning of Luke: *Watch yourselves, or your hearts will be coarsened with debauchery and drunkenness and the cares of life.*

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 25 (24) is a prayer of trust and speaks of God's faithfulness, friendship and love. It should help us receive the first reading as people of faith.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Our first reading today was written at a time of tremendous difficulty, not unlike our own. Nevertheless, Jeremiah offers a vision of hope which points us towards Christmas and the birth of Jesus.

Second reading

1 Thessalonians 3:12-4:2

Although short, this first reading offers not only a prayer but also some advice on how to live. Like ourselves, the people in Thessalonica were wondering about living in a faithless world as believers.

Gospel

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

Gospel readings which talk about the end of the world can be disconcerting to us. What are we to make of them? The real purpose of such warnings lies in the second part of the Gospel: if this is how things are, how should we live?

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

We are going to hear a lot of Isaiah in the Advent daily readings. These are often highly poetic, so the "trick" will be to convert them into something which speaks to us today and not simply to the grand scheme of biblical history.

It may be worth reminding people that the present book of Isaiah was written over a few centuries, reflecting differing contexts and concerns. In spite of that, the final edition is quite unified.

Monday 30 November

St Andrew, apostle

Romans 10:9-18

Paul is convinced that the Word of God is very near to us, "in our hearts and on our lips." We need, nevertheless, bearers of that Word, more than ever...perhaps I could be a carrier myself?

Matthew 4:18-22

As usual in the call stories, things that would interest us—how did their wives and children feel?—are left out and we stand before the sovereign call of Jesus. Have I heard that call in my own life?

Tuesday 14 July

Isaiah 11:1-10

The human hope for harmony is portrayed in this reading as a harmony in nature itself, even among the most unlikely animals.

Luke 10:21-24

Jesus pronounces a remarkable prayer in today's gospel, a very encouraging prayer: we all stand before the mystery and mercy of God, thank God!

Wednesday 2 December

Isaiah 25:6-10

This reading is familiar from funerals; it offers a great vision of God and God's gift of ultimate, comprehensive consolation. The idea that God will destroy death for ever was a hope at the time of writing; in our Christian faith we know that God has done this in Jesus.

Matthew 15:29-37

The compassion of Jesus is outstanding in this reading: it is *he* who names the need and supplies the food. What hunger does he identify in us today? How are we nourished by him?

Thursday 3 December

St Francis Xavier

Isaiah 26:1-6

As you listen, you may notice all the

words to do with protection: strong city, gates, rock, citadel, forming a great call to faith and trust in God.

Matthew 7:21,24-27

It is always tempting to think that once you've said your prayers, you're done. The prophets regularly pillory such complacency and so does Jesus. In addition, awareness of local geography adds over to his words. In the Judean desert, there are dry river beds called *wadis*, subject to flash floods. To build on such an exposed foundation is the very height of foolishness.

Friday 4 December

St John Damascene

Isaiah 29:17-24

As often in the Bible, there a promises to the deaf, the blind and the poor. Each of us is precisely dead, blind and poor and so the message is for us all today, if only we would look. We hold fast to conviction that the Lord is our light and our help.

Matthew 9:27-31

Miracle stories, like today's, are always meant to be taken at two levels. Rather than wonder about the past, we could ask in the present, how am I blind? What is my need of the gift of sight which comes with faith?

Saturday 5 December

Isaiah 30:19-21,23-26

The prophet raises the hopes of his hearers with a grand vision of peace and prosperity, a gift of God himself. Such harmony and well being come from following the way offered by God. *Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.* (Psalms 1:2-3)

Matthew 9:35-10:1,5,6-

Again, it is the compassion of Jesus which is outstanding. He feels and he acts and he sends out. Our need for the word of compassion and the healing touch of God is great. Perhaps I too am being called to some ministry in the community of faith or in society at large?