

First Sunday of Advent

November 29, 2009

Jeremiah 33:14-15; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Thess. 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

Such a small state, a city-state, really; and so far away. Yet Dubai unsettled global financial markets last week with a request that creditors suspend its repayments on a multi-billion dollar debt, for six months. No one could be certain how destabilizing the wobbling butterfly wings of Dubai's overextended, debt-gorged investment company would prove to be. We may not know until tomorrow, or even later. It was but the latest example of how interconnected the world's financial markets and economies are.

Then, from China, came the announcement of a plan for slowing the growth of its greenhouse gas emissions by 2020. Beijing's announcement came one day after the Obama administration made public a provisional target for reducing this country's emissions. Both countries are looking toward next month's U N Climate Change Conference, as rising temperatures, melting ice caps and rising seas threaten the existence of distant island peoples, and raise fears of widespread hunger in Asia and around the world.

These front-page headline events are but two of the continual reminders that not much that happens anywhere in the world is entirely local any more. The scope of our awareness and the speed at which we hear about what is happening anywhere and everywhere make the world seem small indeed. And this heightens the effects of events and decisions made in one place on all sorts of people far away.

We might assume that the world was "larger" in ancient times. Both communication and transportation moved much more slowly, so the decisions and actions of a people or nations would have been more localized. And that is true, and yet . . .

Jerusalem was and is more than 500 miles from the site of Babylon, as the crow flies, and easily 700 miles by the somewhat easier route north through Assyria and down through Damascus. Both ways lead across deserts and through rugged mountains.

Yet even in the sixth century BCE, the appetites and ambitions of distant neighbors had a devastating impact on the very local safety, identity and prosperity of what remained of King David's kingdom. Even before motorized and airborne armies, Judah and Jerusalem were not safe from Babylonian conquest.

We get only a hint of this in the few verses from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah this morning. The lectionary presents this rather sparse reading at the beginning of Advent so we will hear the promise of "a righteous Branch" that will "spring up for David." and hear in it a prophecy of the coming Messiah: Jesus, Son of God and, by Joseph, descendant of the house of David.

We can hear that Jeremiah is confident in the promise, though his hope is not for a Messiah, but that Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.

If we to turn back a chapter, we would discover that there was much more to Jeremiah's hope than we might guess from these few verses. It turns out that Jeremiah is confident and hopeful in the face of imminent disaster. He himself already is in trouble, imprisoned by the king because he has prophesied, and just keeps on prophesying, that Judah and Jerusalem are doomed. (32:2; 33:1) What he has foretold is now coming true: the armies of Babylon are advancing on Jerusalem.

He knows full well what is coming: a siege, "sword, famine and pestilence," catastrophe. Jerusalem's streets soon will be filled with the corpses of her people. (33:4-5) In the face of impending disaster, Jeremiah has done an extraordinary thing. He has bought land, a field a few miles outside the city that's about to be overrun by a conquering army.

Not because he believes that God will intervene to save Judah and Jerusalem from the Babylonians. He knows the whole land will be desolate, "without inhabitants, human or animal" (33:10). Yet in the face of all evidence to the contrary, he has hope. Though the city and temple will be destroyed and the people carried into exile, Jeremiah trusts that God will not abandon them or the covenant (that they had abandoned!) but will restore their fortunes.

. . . In time. In a future Jeremiah does not expect to see for himself. So he has directed that the deeds be sealed in an earthenware jar "in order that they may last for a long time." (32:14)

Jeremiah's words and act of hope were very local, focused on one small kingdom and people, Judah and Jerusalem, with the hope that the whole united kingdom of David—including Israel, conquered and dispersed by Assyria two centuries before—would be restored.

After the Babylonian conquest and exile, though, the line of David never returned to the throne. But the hope for salvation did not end with Jeremiah.

Over time, the reach of the promise changed and broadened, no longer tied to one blood line. It came to be interpreted as prophesying the coming of a Messiah, one anointed by God to rule with justice and righteousness.

Over a longer time, Jesus of Nazareth came to be recognized by many as Messiah, whose teaching and preaching, life, death and resurrection revealed God's promise *fulfilled* in astonishing and unexpected ways.

And over a still longer time, many have come to understand God's promise of salvation as far broader in scope than any one kingdom or people, place or time; as eternal and open to all.

This despite the history of many rulers, both political and religious, who have convinced themselves and their followers that their institutions of power and authority are synonymous with the reign and will of God.

In today's gospel from Luke, we came in towards the end of Jesus' final recorded teaching in Herod's new temple in Jerusalem, built to replace the one that Babylon had destroyed over 500 years earlier. As in the Gospel according to Mark (heard two weeks ago), Jesus has just prophesied that this temple will be thrown down (21:5-6).

Were we to turn back to the preceding chapter of Luke, we would find Jesus in the temple disputing with a series of Jewish leaders. Their questions and arguments reveal an understanding of God's kingdom and promises as confined to their own political and religious system and expectations. Their hope for the Messiah and the kingdom of God no more than "safe borders and prosperity." (Luke Timothy Johnson, The Gospel of Luke, (The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn. 1991), 318.)

No long term future there. No long term future for any political, economic or religious system that conceives of the future only in terms of its own territory, safety, influence and prosperity. No long term future for any political, economic or religious system that sees itself as having an exclusive claim to the goods of this world or the future promised by God.

It had been 20 years, more or less, since the Romans had destroyed the temple and Jerusalem, by the time the Gospel according to Luke was written. As in Mark, the teaching we hear part of today from Luke began with a listener's question about time, "Teacher, when will this be . . .?"

But in Luke, there is no word about "when", not even that the time is unknown except to God the Father. (*Cf.*, Mk. 13:32) Luke's community is in between times: the time of the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of Christ; and the time of his return, the fulfillment of the kingdom of God, an entirely new season of new life open to all.

We, like the community of Luke, live between the times. And Jesus' exhortations to "all the people [who] would get up early in the morning to listen to him in the temple" (21:38), shared with Luke's community in the Gospel, are for us, too.

Earlier, Jesus warned of arrests and persecutions that would come even before the temple was destroyed. "This will give you an opportunity to testify," he said, a chance to share the good news of Jesus' victory over death, and the coming kingdom of God. While we are not likely to be dragged before governors and kings because of his name, we, too, can make good use of this time to share our own hope both in word and in action.

Like Jeremiah, investing our money and ourselves in desolate places, places devastated by poverty and violence, among the homeless and the hungry, the sick and the

orphaned—in the city or the county, in Honduras or Burundi, or any other places abroad where we may have a connection and commitment.

While the political and economic world is in an uproar, fainting at times with fear and foreboding, you “stand up and raise your heads,” Jesus says, “because your redemption is drawing near.” (21:28) “This generation” of a world alienated and in rebellion against God has not passed away; it will continue until the end. But for any who raise their heads to see, the reign of God has come near. Indeed, even now it is among you. (17:21)

Take heed to yourselves, though; pay attention, be on guard. We are so connected to the energies and movements of the world around us, from expectations and distractions close to home—take the demands of commercial Christmas as one immediate example—to an economic disturbance in far off Dubai or carbon emissions in China. We might well seek refuge in “dissipation and drunkenness” (read any pursuit of pleasure carried to extremes), or be overwhelmed by anxiety or despair.

We might, that is, were we not so deeply connected to the promise of God’s future, that is far greater than any suffering or loss this world can inflict or any distraction it can offer.

We might, that is, if we did not trust in God’s love and purpose for all creation that is more certain than all the appetites, ambitions or blunders of all the world’s powers.

We might. But we don’t.

What we will do is gather together
to lift our souls to the Lord;
to encourage one another and be encouraged by words of hope from past generations;;
to be fed by Christ’s body and blood until his coming again;
to be strengthened and renewed;
to go forth into the world as faithful, hopeful witnesses of Christ our Lord.