

A King Shall Reign
Sunday Next Before Advent
("For the Epistle": *Jeremiah 23:5-8*)

5. Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. 6. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. 7. Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that they shall no more say, The LORD liveth, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; 8. But, The LORD liveth, which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land. (King James Version)

As we approach the Advent Season once again, the theme of the imminent arrival of a great King preoccupies us once more. Our position in 2016 places us over two millennia distant from this King's first arrival, which is the subject of the familiar Christmas story, but ever closer to an event which has no precedent: His coming again in power and great glory. His first coming is thoroughly documented, and attested to by a host of witnesses, but His second coming remains a great unknown. Our imaginations alone, aided by the prophetic texts, are our only resource in attempting to picture something that remains completely outside our experience.

Today's passage from Jeremiah describes the reign of Christ when He returns a second time to assume His place as ruler over all. It is immediately obvious that His first advent is not being described here. As the Man of Sorrows and Suffering Servant, He certainly was in no position to *execute judgment and justice in the earth*, except within the scope of His immediate personal relationships, or through His ministry of teaching and preaching. And both *Judah* and *Israel* rejected Him. Within a few short decades they were forcibly ejected from the land, and their temple of worship laid waste, a fulfillment of dire prophecies first uttered centuries before by Moses:

Deut. 28:58 If you do not carefully follow all the words of this law, which are written in this book, and do not revere this glorious and awesome name--the LORD your God--...64 Then the LORD will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods--gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. 65 Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. 66 You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. 67 In the morning you will say, "If only it were evening!" and in the evening, "If only it were morning!"--because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see. (New International Version)

Similar warnings were repeated often by the prophets, until Christ Himself issued the final one:

There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. 24 They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. (Luke 21:23b-24a)

Among the grand fulfillments of Christ's ministry at His return will be the regathering of His people Israel *from all countries whither [God] had driven them*, when *Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely*. This is a glorious prospect indeed!

If we examine the context of today's lesson in the 23rd chapter of the prophet Jeremiah -- the verses that both precede and follow the lesson-- we will see what a great contrast is represented by the prophesied reign of the righteous King, from the political and religious leadership of the prophet's day. We will find this comparison instructive as we consider the state of things in our day:

1 "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. 2 Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the LORD. 3 "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. 4 I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD. (NIV)

The shepherds, the political and social leaders of the people, those who should be providing protection, are instead *destroying and scattering* them, and *not bestowing care on them*. It is the duty of shepherds to place the welfare of their sheep above every other priority. We can only speculate why things had degenerated to this point, but surely we can assume that there had been a general abandonment of standards, the sort of social standards that in nobler times are widely held and respected. Consciences are informed by expectations of virtue that everyone tacitly affirms, and we expect civic leaders to see to it that these unwritten rules are respected and practiced. But when such principles are relinquished, and expectations vastly lowered, there is no restraining factor in place for the conduct of either the people, or even worse, their leaders. All the sheep -- the evil and the good-- are swept away in an apostasy in which the shepherds themselves are the most complicit.

Just after the lesson from Jeremiah 23, we read further descriptions of the prophet's times:

9 Concerning the prophets: My heart is broken within me; all my bones tremble. I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine, because of the LORD and his holy words. 10 The land is full of adulterers; because of the curse the land lies parched and the pastures in the desert are withered. The [prophets] follow an evil course and use their power unjustly. 11 "Both prophet and priest are godless; even in my temple I find their wickedness," declares the LORD...14 And among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen something horrible: They commit adultery and live a lie. They strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his wickedness...16 This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. 17 They keep saying to those who despise me, 'The LORD says: You will have peace.' And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, 'No harm will come to you.' 18 But which of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?"

Not only are the political leaders corrupt, but so are the religious ones, *the prophets and priests*, those supposedly in possession of the highest calling available to men: informing and instructing the people about God's will. What hope is there for a nation when even its spiritual gatekeepers are corrupt? Where will they look for an example? Who will provide them with moral guidance and with timeless standards against which they can measure all the changing opinions and preferences of men? Furthermore, those who have been vested with spiritual authority are using it to *fill [the people] with false hopes*, assuring them that there will be no consequences from God for their wickedness, *strengthening the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his wickedness*. The only message of "good news" that those who have abandoned righteousness to practice lawlessness want to hear, is that they won't suffer accountability for it. If these false assurances issue forth from those who are in the seat of religious guides, then the conspiracy to commit evil is virtually airtight, unless God Himself chooses to intervene. This is His response to this awful state of affairs:

23 "Am I only a God nearby," declares the LORD, "and not a God far away? 24 Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?" declares the LORD. "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" declares the LORD.

It hardly need be said that the days of the prophet are very much like those we find ourselves alive in today. In response to what we see developing around us, we might say together with Jeremiah: *My heart is broken within me; all my bones tremble. I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine, because of the LORD and his holy words.*

But let's return to today's passage, because it describes days of a very different order, those that will be inaugurated at the Second Advent of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. What will be their character, in absolute contrast to the debauched misery that characterized the times of the prophet and so eloquently describes our own age? The righteous King *shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth*. In His very own Person He will combine an example, a standard, a base-line, an absolute point of reference against which all things can be reliably judged and assessed. There will be no need even for a democracy to establish a majority consensus, because the imposition of righteousness will be guaranteed by the One who Himself is the Author and Originator of virtue and principle. Gone forever will be the false shepherds and bogus spiritual leaders. The uncertainty and insecurity which characterize even the most informed and educated of human opinion will be a thing of the past.

As we enter Advent this year, let's try to keep in mind that this King is destined to reign, no matter how great the prevailing wickedness and how apparently lost the cause of righteousness often appears.

With eyes of faith we can almost behold the beginning of His glorious rule!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.