

Better watch out...he's coming!
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

We are entering a season of anticipation. The media will be full of cheerful warnings that Santa is coming and children need to be good. My wife remembers in her childhood her father warned the children that when they saw the curtains moving (due to the air movement from the heating system) it was “Santa watching them”. People are anticipating family gatherings and Holiday parties. People are dreading the crowded stores and the frantic last minute shopping for those folks who are so hard to find gifts for. Yesterday Walmart reported he biggest one day sales ever and down south a woman was trampled unconscious in the rush to buy “on sale” DVD players.

This Christmas season the usual anxieties are complicated by the added stresses of wartime, the call-up of more reserves, continued losses to guerrilla resistance in Iraq and Afghanistan, continued shaky employment figures as good paying manufacturing jobs leave the country and are replaced, if at all, by lower paying service jobs. Factor in the personal stress as families face marital tensions, bereavement, worry about their kids, their finances, or their parents, and you have a stressful time of anticipation. For a number of years I was active in AlAnon Family Groups and around the edges of AA and I knew a lot of folks who found the holidays especially

tense and stressful as they anticipated the parties and the excessive drinking that they had tried so hard to prevent. Among those folks there was a lot of wishing it would just get over. I have to admit to a good deal of “Bah Humbug!” feelings.

A couple of weeks ago Larry talked about apocalyptic, the expectation that when things have gotten bad enough God will step in and end the bad stuff and make a new world for the faithful. Our scriptures come from such bad times, Jeremiah lived in Jerusalem when the Babylonians (ancestors of at least some of the Iraqis) had assumed the dominant position in the Near East. They had overthrown the Assyrian Empire which had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel some 130 years before and Judah was a subject state of the empire with the Babylonian King basically choosing who would be king in Jerusalem. Jeremiah kept warning the court and the king that they might as well do what the Babylonians asked because they were not powerful enough to revolt and their hopes of Egyptian help were likely to disappoint them. It is never a good feeling to be a minority cog in an imperial wheel and the leaders in Jerusalem kept trying to arrange some deal. Finally the Babylonians had had enough and they captured Jerusalem and as was the usual practice in the ancient Near East, took the wealthy, politically connected, and talented people into exile in Babylon, replacing

them with elites from elsewhere. It was a successful tactic because the empire kept the talents of those subjects but deprived them of their political base so that they could not easily revolt.

For the Exiles, the destruction of their beloved capital City and especially the Temple built by the Great King Solomon was a terrible blow. How could God have so abandoned his people that he would allow the holy Temple to be destroyed? In times like that people could only hope that God would take a hand in history and restore his people in some dramatic way. Ezekiel, a prophet contemporary with Jeremiah actually wrote some apocalyptic visions of restoration. His famous vision of the dry bones which came together after lying abandoned on a mighty battlefield and being again clothed with sinew and flesh is a clear vision of such divine restoration.

Luke's apocalyptic material is, as Larry noted when we looked at the earlier part of the Chapter, is a bit more cosmic, envisioning an end to this wicked world and God's provision of a lovely new one. Once again this yearning after apocalyptic is the accompaniment of the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Once again the Jews had been a subject people, a province of the Roman Empire. King Herod had been a Roman vassal. He had tried to act like a proper king of Israel and Herod had built a magnificent Temple in Jerusalem on the mount where the al-Aqsa Mosque and the

Mosque of Omar now stand. Rather typically for the Romans the nearby “Antonia”, the headquarters of the Roman governor, adjoined the Temple area and stood a bit higher so that the Romans could see into the courts of the Temple. The Romans were religiously tolerant but they did not allow political dissent. When revolt broke out, the small Roman detachment sent for reinforcements and with their usual efficiency crushed the revolt.

It had been a bad year in Rome, Nero had died, was quickly succeeded by a couple of inept emperors and finally at the end of the Year 69, General Vespasian who had pretty well crushed the revolt in Jerusalem went to Rome to become Emperor and his son Titus finished the job, tearing down the Temple and taking a host of prisoners into slavery. The early Church was of course caught up in all this since most of those early Christians were Jews, and they were as concerned as their neighbors, except... they knew that God had already raised Jesus from the dead, that the Messiah, God’s Christ, was now in control of the world and would, they believed, be returning in glory and power to set things right. For Christians, this expectation that God will finally intervene in human affairs and do what we do not seem able to do for ourselves was an integral part of the early faith.

We still see some of our neighbors who think they know that things have finally reached a point where the end must come and who preach that hope with some specificity. For most of us the *eschaton*, the end of the world, is something we think of more in terms of “*end* meaning *purpose*” rather than “*end* meaning *temporal finish*”. We, like the early Church, share the belief that at the end, the purposes of God will be fulfilled and we can put most of our emphasis on the here and now, trying to do the best we can with the opportunities for love and service which come our way. After all, there is little we can do about yesterday and tomorrow may well bring different trials than the ones we fear so we do well to live one day at a time, doing what we can to make our lives and our world better. We can be confident that God will be able to use our best efforts, even the ones which seem to fall short and fail.

For us, the promise Jeremiah made to his people in God’s name continues to stand as a hope and expectation. *The days are surely coming says the LORD when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors...a covenant that they broke...but...I will put my law within them, I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people. (Jeremiah 31-33)*

As we start on the weeks of Advent, looking ahead to Christmas we need to start with that change of heart and that excitement about the possibility of new life in Christ. That possibility is always before us. In our time the Advent season has become more celebration than penitence, yet unless we look carefully at ourselves and resolve to be better we are unlikely to get beyond the superficial joy and sentimentality of the season. If we will make a serious effort to prepare our hearts and our homes for God's incarnation, becoming ready to have the Lord dwell within us as God dwelt in Jesus Christ we might be blessed with a Christmas which is not only Merry and joyful but which would transform our very lives.