

AN INTRODUCTION TO A BIBLICAL STUDY OF THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

Western (and particularly American) Christians of the twenty-first century approach their faith from out of the western traditions of individualism, independence and self-determination. We view life through the colored glasses of these traditions. Consequently, we read the Bible from these same perspectives. People from Asia, Africa, the Mideast and Latin America, however, read the Bible quite differently. They view the Bible from their cultural perspectives on life as being corporate, intertwined and profoundly social.

Which is right? How should one read the Bible? Well, when one considers that the Bible was written by Mideasterners and not Europeans or North Americans, one must realize that the Bible is written out of a corporate, social and interdependent cultural perspective. Thus, when one reads the Shema, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:4-5); one is primarily reading instructions to the nation (a corporate entity) to be centered in Yahweh, and only secondarily to individuals within that nation.

In order to capture the authentic message of the scriptures, it is important for us who are westerners (and especially Americans) to remove our cultural individualistic sunglasses and see through the clear discerning glasses of a people who both viewed life and wrote their Bible from a corporate, social and interdependent perspective.

Much of the church today uses the lectionary each Sunday to cover much of the Bible in a three-year cycle of weekly readings from the Hebrew Bible, the Gospels and the Epistles (including Acts). The lectionary we use in the dispersed religious community of Partners in Urban Transformation is the *Common Lectionary* (Revised), developed by the Consultation on Common Texts. The Consultation is a forum for liturgical renewal among many of the Christian churches of North America. For this year, we are using Cycle B.

The many associates and board of Partners in Urban Transformation, all of whom are actively involved in ministry, work with the PUT staff in using this lectionary in our worship together, in our dispersed worship and within our local congregations as the scriptures for specific Sundays. Out of our corporate reflection on given texts, the lectionary for a given Sunday is then released on our website three weeks before it is to be used in worship in order to enable pastors and Christian workers to use these scriptures in their personal reflection, for sermon preparation and for Bible study.

What is significant about this biblical work, however, is that it intentionally seeks to read the Bible with the Hebrew and early Christian “eye-glasses” of a people and a faith that is corporate in perspective, committed to the transformation of the world, is centered on social justice and stresses our interdependence with each other.

We hope you will find these Bible studies helpful both for your personal reflection upon scripture and in your sharing of scripture through the sermons you may preach or the Bible studies you may teach.

Robert Linthicum

(Cycle B Advent 1.doc)

ADVENT

The First Season of the Christian Year

ADVENT AND THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

Advent is the beginning of the Christian Year. The Christian Year and the Season of Advent both begin on the Sunday nearest to November 30. Thus, the Christian Year does not follow the Julian calendar, beginning on January 1, but follows its own calendar, beginning in late November or early December.

What is the Christian Year? It is simply the means by which the Christian Church, to some degree or another and in all of its traditions, remembers and celebrates the important events both in the life of Christ and in the church's formation of itself as a community of believers. Even the most nonliturgical of churches celebrate at least some part of the Christian Year – in that they will inevitably celebrate Christmas, Good Friday and Easter. The most liturgical of churches – Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and Anglican – will celebrate the Christian Year both in its entirety and throughout its worship. Other churches – like the Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists and Reformed will use it optionally in worship so that, for example, you can attend worship in some Presbyterian churches that follow the Christian Year assiduously while other Presbyterian churches will follow it from time-to-time. But the point is that, to one degree or another, all churches will observe at least some portion of the Christian Year.

The formation of the Christian Year began at the very beginnings of Christianity while it was still a reform movement within Judaism. The very earliest Church would gather as a Jewish community on the Jewish Sabbath to faithfully worship as all Jews would in their synagogues. But they would also gather on “the first day of the week”, the day of Jesus' resurrection, to study together the Hebrew scriptures in the light of their experience with Christ, to enjoy table fellowship together, but most of all, to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in obedience to their Lord (Acts 1-9). This weekly gathering of Christians to celebrate that sacrament together – even before they had taken their leave of their Jewish heritage – was the origin of the Christian Year.

From that origin in the Christian communities of the earliest Church, the Christian Year began building. Likely, the first holiday (holy day) the Christians began celebrating as a special day within their year was Easter. Good Friday would have soon followed, then Pentecost, then Christmas. Gradually, more and more days of the year – both Sundays and other days (like the celebration of Christ's baptism by John the Baptist) – were intentionally celebrated by the Church. Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John and one of the earliest writers of the church after the writing of the New Testament, noted how the Christians celebrated Easter in the first century. By the fifth century, the Christian Year was well established, and has continued developing ever since.¹

¹ Gibson, George M., *The Story of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), pp. 68=106.

The primary ways the Christian Year is celebrated today is through its seasons and the use of the lectionary. The seasons (e.g., Lent, Advent, Epiphany, Pentecost) provide a vehicle by which churches celebrate significant moments in the life of Christ and use those moments as vehicles for reflection, prayer, the observance of disciplines, or for merry-making! They will celebrate those seasons through music (e.g., Christmas carols, Easter hymns), through brightly colored banners, stoles and paraments (e.g., purple for Lent, white for Christmas and Easter, red for Good Friday – the choice of the appropriate color is obvious), and for some churches, through liturgies. But the most important way the Church observes the Christian Year is through the lectionary.

The lectionary consists of three or four passages of scripture used in every worship service of the Christian Year. Those churches that use three passages of scripture traditionally select from the lectionary an Old Testament lesson, a Gospel lesson and an Epistle lesson. Those traditions that use four passages of scripture add to the lectionary one Psalm each Sunday.

The choice of scripture in the lectionary is for a three-year period. Then it repeats itself. By assiduously using the lectionary over its three-year period, a church will have covered almost the entirety of the Bible. The homily or sermon for the day is to be built upon the lectionary readings, so that what is preached is an exploration and explanation of those scriptures made relevant to life in today's world. Thus, use of the lectionary guarantees that the preacher will not end up pursuing a theological "hobby-horse", preaching on what most intrigues him or her. Rather, the lectionary forces the preacher to always be encountering scripture that he or she might not normally study, and allow God to speak to that preacher and through that preacher God's Word for God's people on that Sunday.

THE SEASON OF ADVENT

The word "advent" simply means "coming" or "arrival", and is from the Latin, *adventus*.² Its use in Christianity is in reference to the coming of Jesus Christ. Advent is the ecclesiastical season immediately before Christmas. In Western Christendom, Advent begins on the Sunday closest to November 30, continues for four Sundays, and concludes with Christmas Eve. In the Orthodox churches, Advent begins in the middle of November and is consequently a longer season. In both traditions, Advent signals the beginning of the Christian Year – so it both signals the coming of Christ and the arrival of the "New (Christian) Year"! Its liturgical color is purple.³

The purpose of Advent is to prepare Christians for the coming birth of Jesus Christ. It stresses both the coming of Christ as a babe to the world and his coming again to rule the earth. But it also stresses his continual coming into the hearts of those who "prepare him room". As Pascal so beautifully put it, "Jesus Christ and the apostles taught us that there would be two advents, one in lowliness to humble the proud, the other in glory to exalt the humble".⁴

² Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary

³ F.L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 19-20; *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 1035-1036.

⁴ As quoted in Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

All the liturgies, Advent hymns and the lectionary readings emphasize the doctrine of the Incarnation, and each Sunday has its separate emphasis on a portion of the Incarnation. The first Sunday examines Christ's coming in both Creation and in his Exaltation (the second coming). The second Sunday reflects on the revelation of Christ throughout the scripture (that's why this Sunday is normally Universal Bible Sunday, sponsored by the American and British Bible Societies). The third Sunday looks at the coming of Christ prophetically, both examining the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist. The final Sunday of Advent concentrates upon the coming of Jesus as a baby in Roman Israel. Thus Advent ends with the attention of all the worshippers being drawn back to the manger and the birth of the Christ child. Our reflections over the next four Sundays will follow this traditional format, as we examine the coming of Jesus "in lowliness to humble the proud, and in glory to exalt the humble"!

(Cycle B Advent 1.doc)

The First Sunday In Advent, Cycle B

Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Mark 13:24-37; I Corinthians 1:3-9

Isaiah 64:1-9. If we are to work substantively with this passage, we need to put it into its larger context in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah can be divided into three primary segments: Israel under siege (chapters 1-39), Israel in exile (40-55) and Israel restored (56-66). The first section, “Israel under siege”, deals with all that remains of Israel (the two tribes surrounding Jerusalem that make up the southern kingdom of Judah) as it seeks to maintain some degree of sovereignty and independence under the dominance of the Assyrian Empire; it primarily consists of Isaiah’s prophecies in that political context from 742-680 BCE. The second section, “Israel in exile”, speaks to a nation that has been destroyed by the Babylonian Empire, and in which its political, economic and religious leaders have been taken into exile to the city of Babylon; it primarily consists of pastoral care of the captives and the prophet’s effort to give them hope in the midst of their exile of 591-539 BCE. Finally, the third section, “Israel restored”, is written in the light of Cyrus’ conquest of the Babylonians, his inauguration of the Persian Empire and of the consequent return of the Israelite exiles back to Jerusalem; it deals with the situation around 520 BCE.

Introduction for today’s Old Testament Lesson. In 539 BCE, following a decisive victory against the Babylonians, the Persian army surrounded the city of Babylon. The city surrendered without a struggle, the Babylonian king and his regent were placed in exile, and Babylonia became part of a rapidly expanding Persian Empire.

The first act of Cyrus was to free all the captive peoples of Babylonia. He permitted those Israelites who so wished to return to Palestine and gave them permission to build a Temple there to Yahweh. He gave them money, tools to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, and grain to replant their fields.

As the Jewish remnant returned to Palestine, a new day seemed to be dawning for Israel – a day earlier prophesied in Isaiah. It was a new exodus from the land of bondage, and a new beginning in the Promised Land. Leading the Jews was Shesh-bazzar, a new Moses and Joshua in one person, a prince in the line of David, and Cyrus’ personal appointee as governor of the new Jewish colony.

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, the Israelites immediately set about rebuilding the city and its Temple, and planting their crops. The Yahweh cult began functioning in earnest again. Through the entire community pulsed the conviction, “We will not make the mistake of our fathers. We will be true worshipers of Yahweh”.

But years passed and God’s glorious kingdom predicted by Isaiah failed to materialize. Cyrus was not converted to the faith of Israel. The Persian Empire became an even greater monolithic structure than was Babylon and appeared undefeatable. Other tensions arose in the little community as well. The scramble for land left deep resentments, and was followed by years of bad crops. Drought and famine plagued the people. The syncretistic religious pattern that had evolved in Palestine during the seventy years the orthodox Jews were in Babylonia clashed

directly with the monotheistic worship of Yahweh by the returnees. A sharp division developed between the returnees (who felt they were to bring in God's new age) and the residents who had absorbed much of their pagan environment. Animosity and actual fighting broke out between the two factions, and work on the temple and the city ground to a halt.

Then external events began to move rapidly. Cyrus appointed a new governor for Israel, Zerubbabel, another Jewish prince. Cyrus died, and his son took the Persian throne. He defeated Egypt and annexed that country to the Persian Empire. But on his way home from the Egyptian campaign, he committed suicide. A battle for power ensued, a Persian general named Darius seized the throne, and many of the nations under Persian dominance took the opportunity to break away from Persia. Revolt spread throughout the Persian provinces, and the empire seemed to be crumbling.

At this strategic moment, when purpose seemed drained from Israel and the Persian Empire seemed close to collapse, two prophets appeared in Palestine – Haggai and Zechariah. Their message gave new hope to the struggling Israel.

The day of Yahweh was finally approaching, they declared, when God's kingdom would be established upon the earth. The present anarchy spreading throughout the Persian Empire was an indication that the empire was collapsing and God's kingdom was pending. God would bring the empire down, its control would be transferred to Jerusalem, and Zerubbabel would become the new monarch of the world. But Israel needed to prepare for this coming turn in events. They needed to get busy and complete the Temple.

The people responded with gusto to the zealous message of Haggai and Zechariah. Immediately they set to work on the Temple, working rapidly to complete the project before the day of the Lord arrived. But those who followed the theology of Isaiah couldn't remain silent at this travesty both of national will and of Hebrew theology.

The man who became the author of Isaiah 56-66 was convinced that the Israelites who had returned from Babylonia had, like Esau, sold their birthright for a bowl of bean soup (Gen. 25:29-34). He pointed out that the building of the Temple was an inappropriate goal for the Israelite community. The community had been called to a ministry of servanthood, a ministry of compassion and love to those who did not know Yahweh – even at the cost of suffering and dying. Centering on the Temple and on worship diverted Israel from its true calling to minister to the needs of humanity. In some of the strongest language in the Bible, Isaiah stated,

“Is not this the fast (worship) that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? . . . Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am” (Isaiah 58:6-7, 9a)!

In disgust, Isaiah announced that Israel had fallen so far short of God's intentions that Yahweh was no longer going to work through his chosen nation. Israel had learned nothing from its exile in Babylon, for Israel was once again reverting to the same beliefs and attitudes as its ancestors

before the exile. All hope was lost for Israel, because it refused to fulfill the covenant. Therefore, Isaiah indicated, God would select a new people, a faithful few from within Israel who would become God's true servants. This group would be called the "remnant".

Isaiah 40-55 had developed the profound concept of the suffering servant. Now, this writer of Isaiah 56-66 wedded the theology of the suffering servant to the belief that a symbolic Israel, the remnant, would take on this redemptive role. The remnant was representative of all Israel. Through the remnant people – and perhaps, only through one remnant person, all Israel would assume its servant role.

The remnant, then, would be the symbolic Israel. It would be made up of those who seriously intended to follow the covenants and to be God's priests to the world. The aim of the remnant would be to win the world to Yahweh through sacrificial love. They would be willing to face rejection, suffering and even death to be God's new suffering servant. But their reward would be the recognition that their consistent servanthood would bring God's new kingdom into the world.

Isaiah announced the imminent end of the age. God would return the world to himself, using a faithful remnant. The Temple would become a "house of prayer for all peoples" (56:7). Humanity (and not just Israel) would be redeemed and the world's evil eradicated. History would reach the goal for which it was created, and all people would know God and live at peace with their neighbor. But now it was the responsibility of the remnant to fulfill the conditions that precede the coming of the day of the Lord. It is against this context that our Old Testament scripture for today – Isaiah 64:1-9 -- is written.

The Scripture. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence", the prophet begins (64:1). Isaiah pleads with God to make his presence unmistakably clear to Israel. He wants God to act, and to act decisively. Isaiah calls on God to act either in judgment or in redemption – but above all, to act! Don't just keep tolerating this people. Do something!

The prophet then reminds God of the awesome ways he has acted in Israel's past, ways that no one could fail to understand. "When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him" (vss. 3-4). God acted to free the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, rescued them at the Red Sea, and came to them at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16-18; Deut. 10:21; Psalms 66:3-6, 106:22). In other times and in other ways, he acted equally decisively (Judges 5:5; II Sam. 22:8, Psalm 18:7; Isaiah 36-37; Nahum 1:5; Hab. 3:6, 10). Why does God not act now?

Then Isaiah answers his own question. "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous⁵ deeds are like a filthy cloth. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you" (vss. 6a, 7a). Given this great opportunity of liberation from Babylonian captivity and of return to their homeland, the Israelite people have chosen to concentrate upon

⁵ By "righteous", Isaiah doesn't mean "holy". Rather, he is referring to the supposedly-"righteous" deeds of worship ritual, dietary discipline and formal religiosity that Israel was observing, rather than the truly "righteous" actions of justice, mercy and compassion toward the poor and hurting of the world.

theological orthodoxy rather than setting themselves to the building of a society that would be truly reflective of God's intentions for humanity. They could have committed themselves to building a politics of justice, an economics of equitable distribution of wealth and the elimination of poverty, and the forming of a truly relational religion. Instead, they have settled for the "bean soup" of religious orthodoxy and the dream of political and economic domination of an apparently collapsing Persian Empire.

But Isaiah's prophecy doesn't end with such despair. He concludes, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter. We are all the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people" (vss. 8-9).

God is our potter; we are the clay – the work of God's hands. God is our Father; we are his children to be molded by him. The image of God as "potter" is one used throughout scripture (Isa. 29:16; 45:9; Jer. 18:1-11; Rom. 9:20-21). God is the one who forms and shapes our destiny. If we live into that destiny, if we embrace God's shaping of us – whether as a nation or as an individual – then we have embraced the intentions God has for us. But if we resist it, if we fight against those intentions as a disobedient and even rebellious child, we create serious trouble for ourselves.

That is what post-exilic Israel has done, Isaiah is proclaiming. It has chosen to embrace the standards for society that are truly the standards of the Ba'als – the standards of dominance, control, greed, exploitation, lust for power and oppression. So the very political, economic and religious systems that Israel would create for their "new" land – systems that had the potential to start afresh – have now become structures that cause a people to embrace a vision for their country that is the very opposite of what God wants – society as Persians and Babylonians and Egyptians intend it. And now Israel seeks to "bless" that embrace of the demonic by building Yahweh's Temple and holding orthodox worship there?

Will not the potter press such malformed pottery back into clay again? Will he not start all over again, recasting his intentions for Israel through a remnant that seems to be apparently willing to embrace suffering servanthood? And if that fails, will the potter not begin shaping another pot – a single man who will be obedient to the shaping hands of the potter and become the suffering servant to the whole world?

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 is a prayer for Israel's restoration. It is a balanced and beautiful psalm, full of powerful images. It is built around a refrain, repeated three times (80:3, 7 and 19):

"Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved."

The first image (80:1-2) is of a shepherd caring for his flock, Israel, but disturbed by their rebelliousness. The second image (80:4-6) is of a father, angry at his children's disobedience. But the third image is the strongest – the one of Israel as a vine (80:8-18). By likening Israel to a vine, the Psalmist joins with Israel's greatest prophets in using a common image – Isaiah in 5:1-

7, Jeremiah in 2:21 and Ezekiel for the entirety of his chapter 15. Here is what the Psalmist has to say about Israel as the vine:

“You (God) brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches; it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.

Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that moves in the field feed on it.

Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand has planted. They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance. But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name” (80:8-18).

The image is a powerful image – one of God bringing a little shoot of a vine out of Egypt, planting it in the rich soil of Palestine, and then watching it grow as it spread to north and south, east and west until that one plant had filled the entire nation of Israel, to its very boundaries.

But then God began acting against it! Apparently for no reason, God broke down the walls surrounding the vine so that the boar and every wild beast might enter the vineyard and forage on the plant (i.e., Assyria, Egypt, Babylon). Now, they have virtually destroyed the vine, and the psalmist is calling to God both for redress and correction of the situation, so that Israel could have “a future and a hope”.

What is intriguing about this psalm is that there is no recognition by the psalmist that Israel’s destruction was caused in any way by their disobedience of the covenant. It is as if he were blind to Israel’s centuries-long rejection of God or their acts of political and economic injustice. There is no *mea culpa* in this psalm. If this psalm were the only scriptural record with which we might work, we would have to conclude that Yahweh was simply acting arbitrarily to punish Israel, with no rhyme or reason to his action. Therefore, the psalm’s prayer, “Restore us, O God; let your face shine that we might be saved” falls on God’s deaf ears, for there is no recognition on Israel’s part of guilt, and consequently no motivation to or action of repentance.

Mark 13:24-37. It is universally recognized that the gospel of Mark was the first of the gospel narratives written. It was likely written in that margin of time between Israel’s seemingly successful revolt against Rome in 66 A.D. and that nation’s total destruction by the Roman military machine in 70 A.D. In that interim period, Jewish Christians, like all Jews, were being pressured to make a choice: to either remain loyal to Rome and the Jewish systems (chief priests, elders, Pharisees and Sadducees) or to join with the zealots in revolution against Rome and their Jewish co-conspirators. However, the writer of the gospel of Mark suggests that Jesus’ life, ministry, death and resurrection calls the church to a third way – to a *radical* approach to the world and its institutions that goes far beyond either the maintenance of the status quo or

revolution. For to be radical means that one goes to the “root” (from the Latin *radix* or “root”) in both one’s social analysis and in one’s actions. That is what Mark 13:24-37 is all about.

Our Gospel passage for this Sunday’s lectionary is part of a larger passage that extends from Mark 12:35 through 13:37. One cannot understand Mark 13:24-37 without setting it in that larger pericope. Set in apocalyptic language, this larger portion of Mark is actually a brilliant analysis of the alternatives facing Christians and the church as they seek to work for Christ and his kingdom in a world that gives its allegiance to Caesar and to dominating systems.

Mark 12:35—13:37 begins with Jesus’ condemnation of the dominant culture. He does this in three ways. First, Jesus debates the relationship of David to the Messiah (12:35-37) by using Psalm 110 in order to argue that Messiah is not to follow in the Davidic tradition of dominating power by imitating political control (i.e., be “David’s son”). Instead, he is building an entirely different kind of kingdom than what the “David’s” of the world build.

Second, Jesus polarizes the “rich scribes” and “poor widows” (12:41-44). By comparing scribe and widow, Jesus is expressing his disgust at the costs of a magnificent temple that is built upon the exploitation of the poor (including getting them to give voluntarily from the little that they have).

Finally, Jesus directly attacks the leaders of Israel’s religious, political and economic systems (12:38-40) who “devour widows’ houses” in order that they may have “places of honor at banquets”.

In 13:1-3, Jesus therefore totally repudiates the temple and the dominating, greedy and oppressive systems the temple symbolizes by declaring that “not one stone will be left upon another” of that rotten system. He rejects the nation’s systems and their lust for unilateral power, wealth and control of the people. And he rejects them because they have built their power upon the exploitation of the poor.

Jesus’ disciples ask him, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished (13:4)?” Their question, put that way, provides Jesus with the opportunity to declare his rejection of the exploitive and oppressive systems of the world (even of the “Godly” world of Judaism) by making use of the literary device of apocalypse. His “sermon” (13:4-37) is actually a sermon on radical patience.

Jesus in essence says to the disciples, “You can respond to the systems of Israel and of Rome in one of several ways. You can succumb to them. You can revolt against them. Or you can use Jesus’ third way!”

This apocalyptic sermon given by Jesus is, in essence, stressing that the transformation of Israel and of the world into the “kingdom of God” is not going to come about by conforming to or cooperating with the systems – because if you do that, you will be seduced by them. Nor will it come about by the violent overthrow of these systems – because, overthrowing them will cause you to ape them.

What is the nature of the power used by the political, economic and religious systems of Israel or of Rome? Jesus suggests that the power they use is unilateral, top-down, controlling. “They will hand you over to councils (“Sanhedrins” is the actual Greek word); and you will be beaten in synagogues” (13:9). The Gentile rulers and their Jewish counterparts rule by domination. Whether that leadership is political, economic or religious, it is all built on the premise of an unequal distribution of power that results in a selected few having authority and domination over all others. It assumes that “might makes right”.

What, then, shall we do against such tyranny? Should we revolt against it and overthrow it? Jesus warns, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come *in my name* and say, “I am he”, and they will lead many astray” (vs. 6). Or again, “False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect” (vs. 22). Revolution can seduce as easily as can greed-filled and power-lusting systems.

The reason why a revolutionary “solution” to oppressive systems can lead astray is because it is not truly an alternative. It only seems to be an alternative. Revolution operates on the same premise as do the systems, the premise that “might makes right”. The Jewish revolutionaries may amass sufficient power to throw off the shackles of Rome and the Jewish priesthood. But with what will they replace it? The oppressed, rising up to overthrow the oppressors, always become the new oppressors themselves. Different people; same results – the people still end up oppressed! That is why revolution is not a radical response, but a reactionary response. And that is why revolution, even when apparently successful, is always bound to fail its lofty ideals.

But the fact of the matter is that, against the combined power of Rome’s military might and of the Jewish leaders’ willingness to do anything to remain in power and wealth, any revolutionary effort on the part of Israel will be put down in bloody suppression. And if that happens, then “brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death” (vs. 12).

What, then, will work? Only the third way of Jesus. As Jesus put it elsewhere in Mark, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:43b-45)!

The root of the problem is our understanding of power, Jesus is teaching. Both Roman governor and Jewish revolutionary, both Jewish priest and Jewish peasant understand power as unilateral, as domination. But what if Godly power is something entirely different? What if true power is relational?

In the above statement, Jesus is teaching that the “one who gives his life as a ransom for many”, the one who is “servant” is the one who truly holds the power. What Jesus is teaching his disciples is the unbelievable power of relationships. Rather than “power over”, relational power is “power with”, shared power, mutual power, reciprocal power. It is not the power of weakness, of acquiescence, of apathy. It is direct, specific, realistic, flexible, accountable and negotiable. But it is a power that is built upon the relationships one has carefully built with others that seeks the good of the other as well as one’s self. Therefore, by definition, it is a power that seeks “not

to be served but to serve”, even if that means giving one’s life as “a ransom for many”. This is Jesus’ “third way” – the radical solution that will keep the Jewish and Roman worlds from destroying each other.

Thus, in this apocalyptic sermon, Jesus declares that the Jewish and Roman systems “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” (13:26-27). Jesus, and the “third way” of Jesus will eventually win. The systems, if they continue to operate out of a conceptual framework of dominance, will collapse (“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”⁶ 13:24-25). And the world will become in fact what God has always intended the world to be: the shalom community of humanity in relationship with God and each other, political systems acting justly, and economic systems equitably distributing wealth so that poverty is eliminated from the face of the world.

Jesus then declares, “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that (the Son of Man) is at the very gates. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (vss. 28-29, 31).

Read the “signs of the times”, Jesus is saying. Just as there are clear signs of what is yet to come in nature, so it is that there are clear and present signs of what God intends society to be. The lesson of the fig tree is that the world of dominating power, the world of emperor and revolutionary alike, the world of high priest and rebel alike is doomed. It must come to an end in order to make way for the new order to dawn. Dominating and unilateral society as we know it will end, and Jesus’ third way will be embraced by all God’s elect. All the signs of this radical transition are around us – if you have eyes to see it.

What, then, is to be the Christian’s response? What is the church called to be about in the light of the good news of the eventual triumph of the Jesus way? “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come” (vss. 32-33).

The church is called to be vigilant. And of what does vigilance consist? We are to remain vigilant in three ways: (1) Don’t be fooled by the systems and their charade of unilateral power. See through them for what they really are; (2) Be sensitive to the “signs of the times” – the ways God is at work in the liberation of the world; (3) Be at work for Christ and his kingdom in this “world as it is”, holding fast to a vision of the “world as it should be”, and working for that world in all your actions, and in the living of your life.

This apocalyptic sermon by Jesus, therefore, is a sermon about radical patience – of not demanding instant results, of not expecting victory in your lifetime, of seeing God’s kingdom come little step by little step and amidst much defeat and discouragement. It is about taking the

⁶ Walter Wink, in his exhaustive study of “the Powers” has irrefutably demonstrated that references to heavenly bodies in the New Testament is clearly a reference to the spiritual dimensions at work within and behind earthly political, economic and religious systems.

long view, and working tirelessly for Jesus' third way in a world that calls you a fool and a dreamer and an idealist not worthy of being taken seriously.

I Corinthians 1:3-9 is the opening thanksgiving of this letter by Paul to the Church in Corinth. He states, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

This greeting by Paul continues the theme of the sermon preached by Jesus that we considered as our gospel lesson for today. Paul, too, is urging the Christians in Corinth to "stay the course". He begins by noting that we are defined by God's grace (vss. 3-4), not by any measurement used by the world (whether success, wealth, power or popularity). As God's children, we have been endowed with both the spiritual and natural gifts we need in order to be able to carry out God's call upon us to be faithful to him (vss. 5-7). Jesus will equip, empower and use us up to the moment of our death or until his return in power (whichever comes first), when he will establish his kingdom (vs. 8). That is, Paul concludes, God is faithful and will be faithful toward us, calling us into fellowship with Christ's body and the use of our gifts there in order to contribute both to our carrying out of our individual calls and to contribute as well to the fulfilling of our church's call, as together we work toward the world as God intends it to be.

One of the best-known books written by Eugene Peterson has the intriguing title, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980). That title is taken from a statement by Friedrich Nietzsche⁷. As applied to this lectionary, it reminds us that the Day of the Lord will inevitably come. But we remain faithful to that Day by a long obedience, working for Christ and His Kingdom.

In the book of Acts, an angel said to the disciples standing in awe at Jesus' ascension into heaven, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). In other words, God will take care of Christ's ascension and return. In the meantime, don't stand around "looking up toward heaven", waiting for his return. Instead, get to work out in the world for Christ and His Kingdom. Keeping before you God's vision of the world as God intends it to be, work for the realization of that world with all your vigor and determination. Living in that way is truly "a long obedience in the same direction"!

⁷ "The essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (London: 1907), pp. 106-109.

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