

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Psalm 66:1-12; Luke 17:11-19; II Timothy 2:8-15

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7. What Jeremiah prophesied would happen did, indeed, happen. The southern kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonian empire. The political, economic and religious systems of the nation had collapsed, and with them, the nation. The city of Jerusalem had been burned to the ground and the Temple destroyed. The political, economic and religious leaders of Jerusalem had been dragged off as captives to the city of Babylon by the invading king, Nebuchadnezzar. There, in the city of their captors, the former Israelite leaders lifted up their voices and wept. There, in exile, they began to despair that God would ever deliver them from the hand of their hated captors.

It was to those despairing, grieving captives that a letter came from the prophet Jeremiah. And his advice to those exiles is a word we need to hear as we seek to be God's faithful people in our time and place. That letter -- and its advice -- now appears in Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7.

“These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*.’”

But the letter doesn't end there. Rather, it ends with this most profound promise: “For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your *shalom* and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (29:10-11).

“Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I . . . bring you back to (Jerusalem).” Yahweh's initial promise to the Israelite political, economic and religious leaders in Babylonian exile seems a harsh promise. Through Jeremiah, God tells them that they will remain in exile for seventy years¹ -- or in other words, a lifetime! They will not be restored to their precious city of Jerusalem.

¹ In reality, Judah was not in captivity for seventy years. This prophecy was written near the beginning of the first invasion by Nebuchadnezzar that resulted in the bulk of Israel's leadership being taken into captivity; that occurred in 597 BCE. The final defeat of Judah and the second deportation occurred in 586 BCE. Cyrus conquered the Babylonian Empire in 539 BCE, and the edict that returned the Israelite exiles to Judah was in 538 BCE. Computing from the first deportation to Cyrus' edict, the Israelites were in captivity for 59 years. So what explanation can be made regarding the seventy years? The first explanation is that Jeremiah was wrong! The second is that the number is meant to be symbolic, not literal. The third is that the period of time from the destruction of the Temple (which occurred in 586) to the completion of its rebuilding in 515 BCE was a period of 70 years. I prefer the third explanation, because the destruction of the Temple would have been perceived by Judah as the destruction of Israel's nationhood, and its restoration would be perceived as the rebirth of the nation.

Likely, neither will their children. Only in their grandchildren lies the hope that Israel will once again be restored to its land.

One might ask why Judah had to be in exile seventy years. Could not the Jews negotiate this sentence with God, as Abraham negotiated the sentence of death God had made upon the people of Sodom (Genesis 18:22-33)? No, they could not negotiate. And that was because of the rationale for the sentence of seventy years.

The reason for such a heavy sentence is presented in II Chronicles 36:20-21: “Nebuchadrezzar took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, *until the land had made up for its Sabbaths*. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.”

The reason Israel had to be in exile seventy years was that it had failed to keep the sabbatical year seventy times – or, in other words, for 490 years. Therefore, one way or another, God would require of the nation that sabbatical rest and redistribution of wealth – if not voluntarily, then by force. But one way or another, Israel *would* keep Sabbath!

So it was that the Israelite captives were condemned to a seventy-year exile. What depressing news this must have been to them. How is it, then, that God could say to them, “I know the plans I have for you, plans for your shalom and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (29:11)? What kind of future is he giving to them if they must live and die in captivity? How is such a life in slavery “a future with hope” and free of “harm”? Is not such a promise a cruel hoax on the part of God?

No, it is not a cruel hoax. Though they will remain a lifetime and die in Babylonian exile, God’s plan for these captive Israelite leaders is meant for their good. It was as if God were saying to those Israelite captives, “I know what I am doing. It is my plan that you be here. And I promise you that I will bless you in this place -- this foreign city. I will make you a rich blessing to all around you. For the promise I give to you is realized as you live out the plan I have for you here in this city of your exile!”

Here, then, is God’s promise for us called to be the church today: “I have good plans for you.” But what is God’s plan that we are called to carry out in order to access God’s promise? Here according to Jeremiah, is the good news in the midst of dark news. And that good news is found in the double meaning of a word Jeremiah uses in what is the pivotal verse of that letter. “Work for the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*. (Jer. 29:7)

“Work for the shalom of the city where I have *sent you into* exile.” The English words “*sent you into exile*” are actually the attempt by English translators to translate a single Hebrew word. The Hebrew

word that is here translated “sent you into exile” has a double meaning.² It can rightfully be translated “exile”. And it can also be translated “sent”. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that in the use of this one Hebrew word, Jeremiah is seeking to communicate two distinct ideas to his Hebrew brothers and sisters in Babylon. He is in essence saying to the Israelites, “You are in captivity because your nation was defeated, your army destroyed, your city burned and you were clapped into chains and marched across the desert into Babylonian exile. That is your *circumstance*. But you are also in captivity because I, the Lord your God, sent you there. You are in Babylon because I need my people in this wicked city. That is your *call from God!*”

Here, then, is God’s promise – not only for Israelite captives, but also for all of us called to be the church wherever we are. We are not in our community simply because of our circumstances – because we were born here, or moved here to take a job or get an education or simply accompanied our spouse here. We are in this community because the Lord our God has called us here – sent us here – needs us here! We are in the city or town or university or workplace by the intentional will of God, acted out through the particularity of our circumstances.

Therefore, what are we called – as God’s sent people – to be and do in the place where God has planted us? We are called to the very same task as were those Israelite captives in the city of Babylon 2600 years ago. “(You are to) seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile, . . . for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*.” Our calling as God’s people into whatever situation which God might call us is to seek that city’s *shalom* -- its peace, prosperity, well-being, wholeness, fullness, reconciliation.

Note where we are to seek the peace. It is not in Jerusalem – the “city of God”. It is in Babylon! This statement was profoundly, even revolutionarily shocking to the Israelites – beyond anything they could imagine or dare to speak! The Israelites are called to seek God’s *shalom* in the midst of Babylon. And they would not experience either personal or corporate *shalom* as long as Babylon was not a city at peace within itself!

What made this statement such a revolutionary statement was that Babylon was the ultimate symbol of evil to Israel! In the Israelite culture, Babylon was a virtual synonym for depravity. This attitude toward Babylon is reflected throughout scripture. Thus, in Genesis 11:1-9, the Tower of Babel (the Hebrew form of the name, Babylon) is the symbolic place of the “confusion of language” where the unity of the world (symbolized by one tongue) is shattered. Throughout the Bible’s historical books and the prophets (e.g., II Kings 20:12-19; 24:10-25:30; Jer. 25:8-14, Isa. 13, 14, 47, 48; Amos 5:27; Acts 7:43), Babylon is pictured as evil. And in Revelation 17-18, the elder John gives the name “Babylon” to human civilization lived in defiance of God, practicing a politics of oppression and an economics of greed and exploitation.

² The Hebrew word is *galah*; that word contains within in it both the component of “exile” (i.e., forced removal from the land) and of “going forth”, “emigrating” or “being sent” (as in an ambassador); see Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 162-163.

To Israel, Babylon is the epitome of the most wicked and dark of cities. It is precisely in the midst of such wickedness and darkness, Jeremiah is saying, that we are to work for shalom. Shalom is not to be sought among God's people, but among those who most reject God! And why? Because God loves Babylon, and can only transform it by sending God's people there (even against their will).

In fact, Jeremiah takes it a step further. He states in verse 7, "for it is in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*." Even one who is in relationship with God and within the embrace of a relational culture (i.e., the church or synagogue) can never fully know peace for his own life, his family or his people, if his city does not experience peace. So God sends his people into precisely the darkest areas of human society to be ambassadors for peace there.

But what does it mean to seek the city's peace? The Hebrew word "shalom" is a key Hebrew word and concept for describing God's vision for human society. Let's explore even more deeply the concept of shalom as it applies to the church's mission in the world.

The English word "peace" doesn't begin to capture the rich nuances of the Hebrew word, "*shalom*". The English word "peace" is primarily negative in connotation. That is, it simply denotes the absence of something – conflict, violence or war.

But the Hebrew word *shalom* means much, much more than the simple cessation of hostilities. *Shalom* is an exceedingly rich concept, a comprehensive word dealing with and covering all the relationships of daily life, expressing the ideal state of life in Israel and, indeed, the entire world. The concept of *shalom* essentially has to do with what the Israelites saw as being foundational to life – and that was being in a sustained and sustaining community with each other. Therefore, the only words in English today that would capture the reality of shalom might be the words "holism" or "holistic transformation". But such words are flat and dull next to the concept of *shalom*.

Jesus built his theology around the concept of the "kingdom of God". It takes very little reading of the Gospel accounts to recognize that what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God was simply the full living-out of shalom upon the earth. The "kingdom of God" was *shalom* personified and particularized in the life of God's people.

The supreme gift of Jesus to his followers was to be *shalom*, which was to be lifted above the commonplace and the everyday to its highest level – living in unbroken union with God in the midst of the adversities of life, and manifested in our union as brothers and sisters in Christ (John 14:27). This comes about as the result of each of us, and all of us together, embracing the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as our own and in our stead (Acts 10:36; Ephesians 6:15, 2:17). Full *shalom*, therefore, is not something we can manufacture or earn, but comes as God's free gift to us – a gift of *amazing* grace (Col. 1:2, Rom. 1:7, I Cor. 1:3, II Cor. 1:2, Gal. 1:3, Phil. 1:2, II Thess. 1:2).

Finally, *shalom* is the ultimate hallmark, the identifying mark of the authentic Church. Christ has broken down the wall of estrangement between all human dichotomies that separate and alienate us from each other (male versus female, slave versus free, parents versus children, race versus race, systems versus

the people). Instead, God's free gift of *shalom*, continually provided to us as individuals and as a community, draws us into one body (Eph. 2:14-17; Heb. 7:2). This is God's continuing act of redemption, its intended scope being the restoration of the whole creation to its proper harmony (Col. 1:19-22).

When God commands us in Jeremiah 29:7 to "work for the *shalom* of the city to which I have sent you," he is calling us, as God's people to the universal ministry of shalom-making (Matt. 5:9). The scope of such a ministry is captured in the varied English words used to translate the Hebrew word *shalom*, in various English translations of Jer. 29:7. The word is variously translated as "peace", "prosperity", "welfare", "good".³ Each translation seeks to capture the rich implications of this command – for, in a profound sense, our task is to be working for the peace *and* the prosperity *and* the welfare *and* the good of all the people, the systems and structures, and even the principalities and powers of our city. It means that nothing is outside the purview, concern or commitment of the Church, whether it is political, economic, religious, social, cultural, environmental or spiritual, whether it is in the public domain or in the private. To work for the full and total transformation of all the people, forces and structures of the city with the love of God is the call and responsibility and joyful task of God's people in the city!

Psalm 66:1-12 is a hymn of liberation. It deals with God's providential deliverance of Israel in three periods of its life as a nation: in its origins as a nation (vss. 5-7), in its more immediate past (vss. 8-12) and in its present in the life of the psalmist (vs. 16). It begins, "Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise. Say to God, 'How awesome are your deeds! Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you. All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name'" (vss. 1-4).

After this introduction, the psalmist describes how God has delivered Israel at the Exodus, in their distant past. "Come and see what God has done; he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There we rejoiced in him who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations – let the rebellious not exalt themselves" (vss. 5-6). Of course, the reference "turned the sea into dry land" deals with God's miraculous deliverance of Israel from almost certain annihilation at the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21-25). "They passed through the river on foot" is a reference to Israel's crossing of the Jordan River at the beginning of their conquest of Canaan (Josh. 3:14-17).

But God not only liberated Israel in ancient times. He continues to do so in the more recent past. "Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard who has kept us among the living, and has not let our foot slip. For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through waters. Yet you have brought us out to a spacious place" (vss. 6-10).

³ "Peace" – the International Version; "prosperity" – the Living Bible; "welfare" – the New Revised Standard Version; "good" – the Jerusalem Bible.

We do not know which event in Israel's then-recent past to which the Psalmist refers, because there is not internal reference to fix the date of the writing of the Psalm. But it could have been God's miraculous rescue of Judah from almost-certain annihilation by Assyria in that empire's unsuccessful siege of Jerusalem (Isa. 36:1-37:38; II Kings 18:13-20:19). Or, if this is a post-exilic psalm, it could have been the defeat of the Babylonian Empire by Persia and Israel's return to the Promised Land (Daniel 5:1-31). But whatever it was, it was the occasion for Israel to interpret God's hand of deliverance in that event.

Finally, God has acted to deliver this Psalmist. "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me. I cried aloud to him and he was extolled with my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer" (vss. 16-19). Again, we do not know what the occasion of this Psalmist's liberation might be. But that he felt delivered by God's action and not his own is self-evident.

In the light of both the nation's deliverance in its remote past, in its near past, and in the life of this person, the Psalmist cannot help but declare: "Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me" (vs. 20).

Thus, the essence of this Psalm is the declaration, "God is awesome in his deeds among mortals" (vs. 5b). God is always intricately involved in our lives and in the world. He is always "messing" with us. Sometimes, his engagement is in terms of victory, fulfillment, miraculous interventions, liberation or salvation (vss. 6-7). Sometimes, his engagement of us is in dark times, in difficulties, times of depression and doubt (vss. 10-12). But whether it is in times of exaltation or of despair, God is among us, God is with us, and God is at work in and through us, making us into those creatures that can glorify his name and work for his kingdom. And *that* should give us hope!

Luke 17:11-19 is the story of Jesus' cleansing of ten lepers. In this story, ten lepers come to Jesus to ask for healing. Jesus gives them instructions on registering their cleansing from leprosy, and then heals them. Nine go to the temple to register their cleansing (and thus move out of the "expendable" class). The tenth, however, returns to Jesus to personally thank him. Therefore, Jesus responds to his act of gratitude, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well" (vs. 19).

A most important element in this story is the way that Luke sets it up. The opening lines of the story are "On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee" (vs. 11).

This opening does not exist merely to provide a transition from one story to the next. This opening is first of all telling us that this incident and perhaps stories after this one deal with Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem. That journey is not simply one of a rabbi going to the chief city in order to participate in the worship of the people. Jesus intends to directly confront those in Israel who provide the political, economic and religious rule over the people. He is going to call them to accountability and demand responsible action, not only regarding Jubilee but their very stewardship of the trust placed upon them

by God and the people to follow the Law to bring about justice, economic equity and relationship with God. Some would argue that Jesus had earlier hoped for a “conversion” of the system’s leaders. But by this time in his ministry, it had become abundantly clear that most of them were not of a mind to convert to reigns of justice and Jubilee. Therefore, they had to be confronted. And if that confrontation meant Jesus’ death, then so be it!

Therefore, the opening statement, “on the way to Jerusalem” was not an innocent statement by Luke, but a statement of Jesus’ intentions to bring the issues to a final resolution.

Second, Luke tells us that Jesus “was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee”. This meant that he was going through rather than going around the “no-man’s zone” that all Jews avoided on their way to Jerusalem. This “no-man’s zone” was an area of mixed loyalties with some recognizing the holy place on Mount Gerizim (the Samaritans) as the authentic center of their religion and therefore the center of their religious, political and economic “powers”, while others recognized the Temple in Jerusalem (the Jews) as the authentic center of faith and practice. What this entire story is about is to answer the question which of these holy places is the one upon which the people should center their loyalty and lives.

The text tells us that when Jesus and his followers entered a village, “ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy upon us!’” Jesus doesn’t heal them directly. Rather, he says to them, “Go, and show yourselves to the priests” (vs. 14). And the text then says, “And as they went, they were made clean” (vs.15). It was their faithful response to the command of Jesus that brought about their healing, not direct healing from Jesus himself.

This instruction on Jesus’ part adds to the tension of the story. The lepers ask Jesus for healing. He tells them to “show yourselves to the priest” for healing to take place. This instruction is consistent with the teaching of the Torah (Lev. 13:45-59; Num. 5:2-3) that one who is healed of leprosy is to go to the priest in the temple who will carefully inspect him and then rule on whether the patient is healed of leprosy. What is significant about this story, however, is that both the Samaritans who worship God on Mt. Gerizim and the Jews who worship God in Jerusalem both obeyed the Torah and consequently followed this requirement.

So it is that, receiving the lepers’ request for healing, Jesus sends them to the priest to demonstrate that they are healed. And they, still leprous, step out in faith to go to the priest to demonstrate that they are free of leprosy. And it is that act that heals them!

But which priest is it to which Jesus sent the lepers? To which temple should they go – to Gerizim or Jerusalem? We do not know. Presumably, the Jews who were in this company of ten would have headed off toward Jerusalem and the Samaritans in that company would have moved toward Mt. Gerizim.

But not this one former leper. “One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan” (vss. 15-16).

It isn’t Jerusalem and its temple that is God’s center (or this former leper’s center) of authentic faith and practice. Nor is it Mt. Gerizim. It is Jesus who is God’s center of authentic faith and practice. It is in company with Jesus that one truly finds the Jubilee people, the shalom community of justice, economic equity and authentic relationship with God. Neither Jerusalem’s temple (and the Jewish political, economic and religious powers gathered there) nor Mount Gerizim’s holy well (where the Samaritan political, economic and religious powers gathered) is where God is. God is where Jesus is – bringing even this newly-cleansed leper into a faith, a community and a social order that God intends for all humanity.

That is the meaning of Jesus’ final statement to the former leper. First he says, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner” (vss. 17-18)? The others chose Jerusalem or Gerizim, but this Samaritan – what had he chosen?

“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well’” (vs. 19). The Greek word used to describe what Jesus had done for this man is *sozo*, which is “to be made whole” or “to be made thoroughly sound”. The nine other lepers were made *clean*; this man was made *whole*! The others were healed of their leprosy and freed of the status that leprosy forced upon them – to be among the expendables. But this man, because of his faith in Christ, his gratitude in returning to give thanks and his willingness to acknowledge Jesus as God’s center of authentic faith and practice was made into a complete man by Jesus – one who was not only made clean of his leprosy (as were the other nine), but transformed spiritually, politically, economically and socially into the person God had intended him to be.

II Timothy 2:8-15 contains two passages from ancient Christian worship that is skillfully woven into the primary message Paul wants to communicate to Timothy. The first passage begins this scripture lesson. “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David” (2:8).

This is likely the opening words of a baptismal hymn or a confessional statement used by the church. It calls upon those speaking and hearing it to keep themselves and their Christian community centered on Jesus Christ, “raised from the dead, a descendant of David”. The creed declares three things. First, that Jesus is the “Christ” (Christos) or “Messiah”; it is, in the Hebrew language, comparable to “Caesar” in Latin. That is, Jesus is the true Caesar of the world, the head over all the political, economic and religious powers of the world. In fact, the church had so embraced this understanding of Jesus by the time II Timothy was written that the title had evolved into part of Jesus’ name; that is, rather than it being “Jesus the Christ” (i.e., “Jesus the Messiah” or “Jesus the Caesar”), the word “Christos” had simply become a part of Jesus’ full name. He was no longer “Jesus ben Joseph” or “Jesus of Nazareth”, but

“Jesus Christ”. So, first, this creedal formula proclaims Jesus as the head over all the powers of the world (including Rome).

Second, it declares that Jesus is “raised from the dead”. This is the justification for making such an otherwise-absurd claim that Jesus was the true Caesar. Jesus had conquered death, the final fate of even the Roman emperors as well as every human being. But this emperor lives forever! He was raised from the dead and never dies (Rom. 6:4-10; I Cor. 15:12-22).

Finally, the creed confesses that Jesus is “a descendant of David”. This is the ingredient that justifies the proclamation of him as emperor of the world. He is of royal blood. He is not an upstart revolutionary who rose to sufficient power to overthrow those already in power and to claim their power for himself. He was born with the power! He was born as “a descendant of David”, Israel’s greatest monarch. By being born of the lineage of David, Jesus is that descendant predicted throughout scripture to hold eternal kingship, the ruler who would be even greater than his forefather, David (II Sam. 7:12-16; Matt. 1:1; Mark 12:35; Luke 1:32-33; John 7:42; Acts 2:30-36).

So Paul tells Timothy, “Remember – and keep on remembering – who Jesus is: the authentic Caesar of all the systems and nations of the world, the only one to have ever risen from the dead and eternally alive, that descendant of David in the royal line who has been longed for since David’s death.” Remember that this is the One whom you serve.

This is Paul’s gospel in a nutshell. And it was because of his belief in and proclamation of this gospel that Paul “suffered hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained” (vs. 9). The political, economic and religious powers of this world did not take kindly to such a proclamation – whether they were Jewish or Roman. Nor did everyone in the church. But suffering and rejection is the inevitable result of the faithful proclamation of who Jesus actually is, and acting upon that proclamation in the ways one is engaged in public life!

Paul thus continues, “Therefore, I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory” (vs. 10). Thus, an apostle has to do what an apostle has to do! Faithfulness to the gospel means a willingness not to be intimidated or stopped by fear of the consequences of one’s actions. Knowing who Jesus is and what God is doing through him in the world, those who proclaim and work for him must do so fearlessly, and to do so “for the sake of the elect” (that is, the church) and for the sake of the world.

The apostle then quotes the second piece of early Christian liturgy. “If we have died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him. If we deny him, he will also deny us. If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself” (vss. 11-13).

This was likely a well-known early Christian hymn. It summarizes magnificently the entire point Paul is seeking to make to Timothy. To die is to live. To endure is to reign. To deny is to be denied. To be faithless will not reduce the faithfulness of God.

In other words, Paul is reminding Timothy and anyone who reads this letter that the way up is down. “Those who seek to save their lives will lose it; those who seek to lose their lives for Christ’s sake and the Gospels will save it” (Luke 17:33). If Christians are willing to suffer for proclaiming and acting on the truth about Jesus as ruler of the political and economic worlds as well as the spiritual, then Christ will be honored. For Christians to be willing to die is to break the final power any government or economy has to influence or control behavior, for such Christians have become unable to be intimidated and therefore have become unstoppable. For Christians to deny that Jesus is Lord of Rome is for Christians to undermine the power of the gospel and thus weaken its influence upon the Roman world. But for Christians to be faithless to Christ does not destroy their salvation – simply because their salvation does not depend upon their good works (even being faithful), but rather on Jesus’ work of sacrifice upon the cross for them. And that is already accomplished for them, whether they act “Christian” or not!

Now Paul makes direct application to Timothy and his ministry, and therefore by inference, to the ministry of any Christian and of the church in any community. “Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth” (vss. 14-15).

So, go and do thou likewise, Paul is in essence telling Timothy and the church. Die with Jesus. Endure the suffering that inevitably comes with the acting out of the rule of Christ in the political, economic and religious arenas in which you live and work. Do not deny him or allow yourselves to be intimidated by the “powers” of this world. Be faithful to the gospel to which you have been called – the gospel of “Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David”. Don’t spend your time within the Body of Christ “wrangling over words” and speculating over theology. Rather, “present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed”, working to help shape the shalom community through working for justice, the equitable sharing of wealth, the elimination of poverty and of seeing all around you coming to a dynamic relationship with God. This is what God has called each of us to be about, for Christ and His Kingdom.

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