

The 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 65:17-25; Isaiah 12 (as the psalm); Luke 21:5-19; II Thessalonians 3:6-13

Isaiah 65:17-25 is one of the clearest and most precise statements in the scripture about God's intentions for human society. This scripture deals with the prophet's dream of a new heaven and a new earth built around a rejuvenated and transformed Jerusalem. Here is revealed God's agenda for the city and for all human society and, consequently, what the agenda of God's people ought to be, as well.

The passage begins, "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress" (65:17-19).

God's creation of "a new heaven and a new earth" is a motif found throughout the book of Isaiah (34:4; 42:9; 43:18; 51:6), but most often, this new creation is intended for Israel alone. Both here and in 51:6, however, the prophet's vision becomes far more universal, as he perceives God's transforming work being for all the nations of the earth and even for the cosmos, as well as for Israel. The imagery of Isaiah 65 proves so powerful that New Testament authors adopt it for their writings (e.g., Rev. 21:1-4; II Peter 3:13).

The message of Isaiah (and, consequently, God's agenda) is stated quite clearly in these opening words. God ultimately sees the city as a City of Joy. God wants to delight over his creation of society, and wants God's people to find joy in their city, as well. It is strategic to effective ministry that we allow ourselves to celebrate our world and to discover in it all that is of good report. God loves the world, and so should we.

The church is called to be a cheerleader to the city. It is also called to name all that is evil and dark about society, and particularly to confront the world's systems and structures when they act in exploitive and oppressive ways. In order truly to be effective in ministry, however, the church cannot allow itself to be overwhelmed by its society's evil. It must take delight in its city, in the people surrounding the church, and in each other in the community of faith. There is much to love in every society.

Health Care and Longevity

"No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. For like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be" (vss. 20, 22b).

Society is to be a healthy place for all people! And the church has the responsibility to work for the longevity and health care of its inhabitants. "Sons and daughters are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him," declares the psalmist (Ps. 127:3). To live in the kind of health conditions that deprive people from raising their children to adulthood or take adult life

prematurely is unacceptable. The work of the church must include advocacy for access to adequate health care for all the people, regardless of their economic condition or their immigration status.

To advocate adequate medical care without also dealing with the very conditions of the world and city that produce ill health is to be short-sighted. The church must be concerned about the stress of 21st century life, which is a major contributor to both psychological and physical breakdown.

To deal with health care in the city is to deal with the issue of stress. The congestion of traffic, the competitiveness of work in a technologically sophisticated society, the expectations upon us to deal with constantly changing and rapidly accumulating information caused by computerization, the stress of living in close proximity to each other (450,000 people lived in the four-mile radius from the church at which I once ministered in Los Angeles), and the intense and frantic pace of life all contribute to the breakdown and ill health of 21st century urban people. An essential part of the work of the church is to question today's urban and secular life style, and to offer a viable alternative to it.

Health care must also include environmental concern. Here in Los Angeles we have the saying, "We Los Angeles don't believe in any air we can't see!" We mean that quite literally. You really can see it – see it on your clothes and on every surface of your home, smell its acrid odor with every breath you take, and feel it burning in your lungs. To be concerned with the health of humans means that one must be concerned with the health of the environment. That means all aspects of the environment, not just its pollution and smog, but the contamination of water (the main cause of sickness and death in most cities of the Global South), the disposal of fossil fuel, global warming, and the mining and harvesting of non-replaceable natural resources (such as the strip-mining of Africa and Latin America and the harvesting of the rain forests of Brazil and Southeast Asia).

Health care, therefore, means more than access to adequate medical care for all. It also means dealing with the variegated stress of 21st century life and with environmental issues. The Bible indicates that such concern needs to be part of the work of the church.

Housing

"They shall build houses, and inhabit them. They shall not build and another inhabit" (vss. 21a, 22a).

Isaiah instructs God's people to be concerned about how people live in the city. Housing, he says, must be for all the people, irrespective of their wealth or poverty. The psalmist also reminds us that God wants his people involved in providing for those in need (Ps. 127:1-2), and surely housing is one aspect of that.

When one deals with housing in the modern world, he or she must face three housing issues: adequacy, distribution, and safety.

The church is to work for adequate housing for all, so that everyone has a home and no one is forced to live on the street. Today, at this very moment, more than forty million children have been abandoned by their parents and are living on city streets. In Sao Paulo, Brazil alone, seven hundred and fifty thousand of them live by their wits and cunning. Between half a million and a million people live on the streets of Kolkata, India. They are born there, grow to adulthood there, marry there, bear and raise their children there and die there – never once in their entire lives experiencing a night under a roof! Even in a country as wealthy as the United States, homelessness has become an epidemic as urban dwellers become accustomed to the bag-ladies and grate-dwellers and the people sleeping in the doorways, the parks, and on the sidewalks throughout U.S. cities. God is displeased with such inequality and expects his people to work for adequate housing for all the people.

The church is to work for just housing, housing fairly distributed to everyone, whether one is powerful or a “nobody”, whether one is rich or is poor. Isaiah states it in a most poignant way: “No longer will they (the common people) build houses and others live in them”. In other words, the prophet is saying, “God wants people to be able to live in the houses they build, to receive housing – not because they are capable of purchasing housing, but because they are human beings!” There is something radically sick with a society when people are forced to live without any housing (never mind adequate housing), while others live in sumptuous surroundings.

Finally, the church is to be committed to safe housing. It is a shock to enter into a squatter settlement of a Global South city; these settlements, erected overnight by the people migrating to the city, cling tenuously to the side of steep hills or over precipices, their unpaved streets deep in mud churned up by countless passing feet, their houses built of cardboard, packing crates, metal sheets, and mud-bricks. Unsafe? One torrential rainstorm, one mud- or landslide, will cause that urban settlement to go tumbling into the depths below.

Such conditions are not found in the Global South alone. One needs only to enter any inner-city slum of the United States or Europe to find people living in shocking and deplorable conditions behind the façade of buildings that look substantial from the outside. The church is to work for safe and well-built housing so that there are no tenements, no slums, no cardboard and tin shacks, no barrios, no bustees or favellas. To work for safe and decent affordable housing for all the people is a part of the work of the church.

Economic Development

“They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not plant and another eat. For my chosen shall enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain” (65:21b-23).

Isaiah calls the church to work for economic development in the city. Jobs are a priority for God in the society he desires to have for humanity. Jobs should, consequently, be a priority to the church, as well.

Scripture stresses the importance of building an adequate economic base under an entire people. Jeremiah instructs the king of Judah, for example:

“This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. For if you are careful to carry out these commands, then kings who sit on David’s throne will come through the gates of this palace, riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by their officials and their people. But if you do not obey these commands, declares the Lord, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin” (Jer. 22:3-5).

In Israel, the king is expected to maintain a just economy. He is particularly responsible for making sure that the oppressed, the foreigner, the widow and the orphan – society’s most vulnerable people – are equitably and favorably treated. The Year of Jubilee and Israel’s other economic legislation were all designed for orderly regulation and adjustment of the economy, so that wealth would not become increasingly centralized in the hands of a powerful few, while the poor only became progressively poorer.

St. Paul, in his advice to slaves and masters, asks of the slaves nothing more than what Roman law required – that they obey their masters – but to be motivated to do so out of love for Christ rather than out of fear of the master. For Christian masters, however, Paul requires treatment of slaves far beyond the requirements of Roman law – for they are to treat their slaves with respect, commitment to the slave’s needs, and in ways that are expressive of their love for Christ. Further, Paul instructs the masters not to threaten their slaves “since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favorites with him” (Eph. 6:9).

Scripture passages like these indicate how both Old Testament Jews and New Testament Christians were seeking to deal with economics justly and equitably. Although their economic specifics are irrelevant for our own day, their operating premises can be instructive for us as we seek to build a Christian economics for the twenty-first century. Promotion of economic justice, control of the distribution of an economy, particular attention to the hurting of any society, and using the law of love as the highest code by which a city structures itself all become principles upon which economic development must be based.

In the worldwide capitalist, socialist, and socialist-capitalist economies that exist in today’s world, of particular importance is employment. In the first world, as technology becomes increasingly complex, an ever-expanding number of people become technologically obsolete – and so do their jobs. This results in a steady expansion of the unemployed and unemployable. This, in turn, leads to a steady expansion in illegal means of making money along the seamy underside of the city – prostitution, drug-dealing, and criminal activity. Thus, a permanent underclass of the poor and disenfranchised emerges in the cities of the first world, most often along ethnic and racial lines.

In the third world, economies are weak, dominated by balance-of-payments and debt-reduction that hold those economics in thrall to the first world. Consequently, those economics are often oriented toward the production of raw materials and processed goods for first world markets rather than the production of goods for their own people. The results for Global South countries is a large unemployed section – normally between thirty-five percent and seventy

percent of a city's population. Without a welfare or social security system which can economically sustain these people, they are doomed to become the forgotten "wretched of the earth". Most respond to their dilemma by entering the "informal sector" of their economy (although some choose the criminal or subsistence routes). Rather than seeking to be employed, those entering into the "informal sector" create their own jobs and businesses; they thus form an informal economy that parallels the formal economy of their city and thus build an economic base for themselves.

How does the church biblically respond to the economic imbalance of its city? In one way or another, the church must become involved in economic development – the creation of jobs, the organizing of people to create community industries and trades, job re-training, economic self-determination, advocacy of the poor. Though the strategies and action plans should differ from city to city, the essential principles are the same.

The church is called to strive for a society where there is a job for everyone and in which no one is forced to work below his level of skill. Isaiah calls us to bend our godly efforts to the development of a secure, balanced economy, a theocratic economy which enables each person to work and to make a valuable contribution to the furthering of the well-being of their city.

Relationship with God

"They shall be offspring blessed by the Lord – and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear" (65:23-24).

Perhaps that which most separates a biblical vision for society from the utopias of dreamers such as John Stuart Mill, Adam Smith or Karl Marx occurs at this point. Each such visionary builds his utopia on the premise that such an ideal world is achievable. Each utopia is built on the premise that humanity is essentially good and if the formula devised by the visionary is followed, then society will reach that utopia.

Scripture, on the other hand, operates on the premise that although humanity is made in the image of God, that image is implacably scarred by the existence of sin (thus humanity is redeemable only by the action of God). Human beings will therefore corrupt every good plan humanity devises. Only God can make society work, as he redeems us and then creates in us a new community (Jesus' "kingdom of God"). The difference, therefore, between the utopias of visionaries and the kingdom of God is that the first is centered on the perfectibility of humanity and the other is centered on God. Relationship with God is the center of the transformed biblical city. Human utopias avoid that relationship.

Isaiah brings out that insight most clearly in this passage on the idealized Jerusalem. In the world as God intends it to be, God will be in such intimate relationship with his people that "before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear". Relationship between God and God's people will be so intimate that he will respond to their longing for him even before they have placed words on that longing. The description is almost one of a lover responding to his beloved at the moment before she reaches for his reassurance, or of a mother

anticipating the needs of her baby even before the baby begins to cry. This is the intimacy God covets between Yahweh and the people of the city.

It is the task of the church to introduce its society's citizenry to God in Christ. This is its primary calling and its exclusive calling. It is not the church's only calling, but it is primary and exclusive. If the church does all the rest, but neglects this task, then it has been irresponsible and derelict to its unique call.

Shalom with the Neighbor

This magnificent poem ends, "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent – its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord" (65:25).

The goal of the city in Isaiah 65 is "shalom". And that is an Old Testament way of referring to the concept of the "kingdom of God". God's agenda for human society ends with that which proves whether a city or state is indeed the abode of God – whether or not its populace lives in shalom with one another. Paul witnesses to the same intention when he writes, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two (i.e., Jew and Gentile) one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility (between them)" (Eph. 2:13-14).

It is the responsibility of the church to work for shalom. This is expressed most clearly by Jeremiah in his instruction to Jewish captives in Babylon: "Work for the shalom of the city to which I have exiled you, and pray to Yahweh on its behalf, since on its shalom depends your shalom" (Jer. 29:7). It cannot be said any plainer than that!

But how do we work for the shalom of the city "to which God has sent us"? As today's Old Testament lesson has shown us, the church must work in the world so that economic development can occur, adequate housing be built, and safety and health care be guaranteed for the poor. The church must take seriously its task to "preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). In the final analysis, however, if the church does not find ways to come alongside the poor so that the poor themselves choose to work for their city's "shalom", it has not really done its job. After all, the people who are best able to assume responsibility for solving a problem are the people who have that problem. That applies as much to the poor and powerless as it does to anyone else. The church therefore must be involved in working with the people for their own self-determination and their own empowerment.

The Bible places quite a bit of emphasis on the importance of empowerment and self-determination, especially with the poor and powerless (see my book, *Building a People of Power* for a detailed demonstration of this claim). One of the clearest such statements, however, is found in Isaiah 61:1-4. This passage, which Jesus used to describe his own mission (Luke 4:18-19) tells of the "Anointed One" who preaches good news to the poor, binds up the brokenhearted, releases captives, and proclaims Jubilee to all. But the passage concludes, "They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations" (vs. 4).

The question that begs to be asked of this text, however, is “Who are the “they” in this prophecy?” It is clear, as one reads this entire prophecy, that those who will rebuild the devastated city will be the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives and the prisoners referred to in the first two verses. The city will not be rebuilt by the Anointed One upon whom the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord came. His task, instead, is to deal with the issues that are immobilizing the people and which are keeping them from rebuilding their city. The poor of the city are the hopeless, the brokenhearted bound up in their grief, the captives and prisoners jailed by their own sense of limitations as well as by the establishment. It is the job of the Anointed One to say to them, “You are free! You are free in God. And God sets you free to take charge of this city.” And once assured that they are free, they do take charge of their city!

This is a critical insight for the work of the church in the 21st century. If people are not empowered to take charge of their own situations, they remain either victims or objects to be pitied. It is irrelevant whether they are poor or middle class or wealthy; if people believe they are helpless to do anything about the forces that constrain them (whether it is the systems or crack cocaine), then they are indeed helpless. And the church is the most liberated body ever created by God, because Christ has freed us from that which once oppressed, minimized and nearly destroyed us. That is the essence of the Gospel. Therefore, our strategic and unique role is to work with all those peoples, groups and structures that feel powerless and out of control so that we may enable them to discover freedom and liberation for themselves. That, in the final analysis, is what working for the shalom of your city is all about!

The most appropriate worship of God is the service of humanity. A primary responsibility of the church is to seek the reconciliation and shalom of all the people. Thus, we see from this exercise, that Isaiah 65 is extremely helpful in enabling us to better perceive and name the work to which God calls the church. And that is the work of “shalom”!

Isaiah 12 is a Psalm that does not appear in the Psalter. It is a hymn of praise written by the prophet Isaiah.

“You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: ‘Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.’ Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel” (12:1-6).

To understand this psalm, one must pay particular attention to one phrase and two words. The phrase is “with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation”. The two words are “salvation” and “Yahweh” (in the NRSV, translated as “the Lord”).

The phrase, “with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” is particularly intriguing because this immediately reminded the Israelite listener to this hymn of young women gathered around a well, scooping up in its bucket the waters of life (or “salvation”) and chatting and visiting around that well as they worked. This statement has many echoes with other such images in the Old Testament (Num. 21:17-18; Psalms 66:2; 67:2; 105:1; 148:13; Isa. 65:8; Jer. 25:30; 65:8; Zech. 2:10) and has a clear example of this hymn’s theme in Judges 5:11, where the author writes, “Hark to the women drawing water (at the wells)! It is the victories of Yahweh they commemorate there” (New English Bible). The sense of Isaiah 12 is of women gathering around the well, attending to the common tasks of daily life but using those tasks as the occasion for celebrating Israel’s deliverance by God (e.g., Exodus 2:15-22).

What is it that these women are celebrating about God? That brings us to the two words used most often in this psalm – the words “salvation” and “Yahweh” (each used three times). Isaiah wrote (and, perhaps, the women sang as they worked), “He is the God of my salvation. I have trust now and no fear, for Yahweh is my strength, my song, he is my salvation. And you will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation” (vss. 2-3, Jerusalem Bible).

The Hebrew words “salvation” (*yeshua*) and “to save” (*yasha*) means “to have victory in battle” or “to develop without hindrance”. If we are to understand a passage like Isaiah 12, it is important to separate the Hebrew word translated “salvation” from the Christian understanding of “salvation”. When we Christians hear this word, it has purely spiritual associations for us, having to do with the release of our immortal soul from sin and into eternal life. But this was not the meaning of the word in Old Testament Israel, nor exclusively within the New Testament, as well.

In the Old Testament, one who was needing liberation from oppression, deliverance from danger and tyranny, or even rescue from imminent peril was in need of “salvation” (e.g., I Sam. 4:3; 7:8; 9:16). For someone to “save” another not only meant that troubled one’s rescue but also meant the transfer to him by the “savior” of some of his prevailing strength (cf. Job 26:2) so that the “saved” one becomes more self-reliant. Of course, the only one in Israel powerful enough to bring victory, security or freedom to another – even the king – was Yahweh (Ps. 98:1; Job 40:14; Ps. 20:5-9). That recognition was the reason why in Isaiah’s psalm for today, the words “salvation” and “Yahweh” are in such close juxtaposition, for salvation for the nation, the village or the people will not happen apart from God!

This more ancient usage of the word is still reflected in the New Testament in such emphases as salvation meaning deliverance from specific ills, captivity, disease, demon possession or even physical death (Matt. 9:21; Luke 8:36; Matt. 8:28; Acts 27:20; Heb. 2:15). Therefore, it is only in later usage of both Old and New Testaments that salvation became increasingly understood in terms of spiritual deliverance, whereas it was originally seen as physical, political, social and economic rescue (as clearly demonstrated in Exod. 2:15-22 and in the “psalm” of Isaiah 12).

Therefore, what Isaiah is declaring in this “psalm” is that Yahweh is Israel’s ultimate “savior” who will deliver them from physical, political, social, economic and spiritual troubles – whether those troubles are caused by Israel’s political, economic and religious leaders, by kings and generals and armies of other nations or even by the way Israelites treat each other. And the

young women, gathering around the wells and collecting the water for their households that day, sing of such deliverance and of the continuing protection and sustenance of Yahweh for them and for their families, tribes and communities!

Luke 21:5-19 is Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the Temple. The 21st chapter of Luke concludes a three-chapter section on the temple. The image of the "temple", of course, was symbolic of the priestly power structure of Israel that not only provided the priestly services of Yahweh worship but the governance of the nation, as well. When Rome conquered any nation, it attempted to rule that nation through the perceived indigenous leadership of that nation. Thus when Rome annexed Israel to the empire, it contracted with the priestly system for the day-to-day governance of that nation, with the Roman procurator responsible only for managing that nation's direct relationship with Rome (payment of taxes, protection of the rights of Roman citizens, maintaining a military presence and Roman law). Therefore, to the Jews, the "Temple" symbolized much more than simply the worship center of Israel, for all recognized it was the primary political and economic force of the nation, as well.

Chapters 19-21 of Luke's Gospel deal with Jesus' direct confrontation of the Temple leadership – and therefore, of the central political and economic power of Israel. With Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem and the temple on Palm Sunday in the 19th chapter, Jesus "claims" the temple for God and for God's purposes, not for the political and economic purposes for which it was being used by the priestly elite in order to maintain themselves in wealth and power at the expense of the people. But the temple leadership is unwilling to be dedicated to the purposes for which God had created them. Instead, they continue to be committed to using their power and influence to oppress and exploit the people (20:45 – 21:4). Therefore, in today's gospel lesson, Jesus moves to predict the destruction of the temple and those who use it for their own aggrandizement and domination of the people, and the impact such destruction will have upon those faithful to God's vision for the world as God intended it to be (the "shalom community" or the "kingdom of God").

Jesus begins today's lesson, therefore, with his prediction of the destruction of the temple. "When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus said, "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down" (21:5-6)."

Haggai the prophet (520 BCE) had motivated the Jews who had returned from Babylonian captivity to rebuild the Temple (what is called "the Second Temple"). They found it hard to be motivated to build what they realized was a distinctly inferior building to the Solomonic Temple that preceded it (Haggai 2:1-9). But under King Herod (73 BCE – 3 BCE) five hundred years later, that inferior temple had been remodeled and expanded into one of the great architectural wonders of the ancient world. In fact, although its construction began in 20 BCE and it was dedicated for worship in 18 BCE, construction was still occurring on it when it was destroyed in the Roman invasion of 70 C.E. Whereas the building of this magnificent temple was done to endear Herod to the people, the creation of such an awe-inspiring monument actually helped to strengthen the political, economic and religious power of the high priest and Israel's priesthood as the ruling political power after Herod's and his heir's deaths. Much as the primary buildings

that house the powers in Washington are grand and awe-inspiring in order to enhance the offices of the presidency, Congress and the Supreme Court, so the construction of such an architectural wonder as the Herodian Temple increased the political and economic influence of Israel's priesthood as the appropriate rulers (under Roman authority) in the Israel of Jesus' day.

In the gospel lesson for today, those who were with Jesus spoke in awe about the Temple. It struck awe in the people both because it was an architectural marvel and because of its significance as the abode of God and, consequently, Israel's political, economic and spiritual center. But Jesus would have none of this deceitful domination and manipulation of the people, masquerading behind nationalistic pride. "As for these things that you see", he responded, "the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down". How stunning and even shocking Jesus' words must have been to those who heard him that day, for the very immensity and solidarity of the building and the 1,200 year religious tradition that it symbolized seemed to all to be everlasting!

But Jesus wasn't done with simply predicting the demise of both the temple and the political and economic powers it represented. He warns his followers not to be deceived by a nationalistic focus or of patriotism (as the saying goes, "Patriotism is the last abode of scoundrels"), for they belong, not to the kingdom of either Israel or of Rome, but to the kingdom of God (vss. 7-8). He then goes on to speak not only of the end of Israel but of the very end of this age.

"When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven" (vss. 9-11).

The Temple will be destroyed (which it was in 70 CE) and Israel with it, Jesus predicts. This political, economic and religious marriage-of-convenience for the mutual aggrandizement of both the Roman state and Jewish national leaders will eventually unravel. It will come apart, as do all apparently-successful efforts to exploit, oppress and dominate the people. What goes around will come around, and the Jewish system will topple! But when it falls, do not be so naïve as to think that this is the end of the world. It is only the end of the Jewish world as Jesus and his disciples experienced it. But the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple would not be the end of the world or even of Judaism itself.

Jesus' social analysis of national and international systems and how they function is remarkably applicable, not only to first century Israel but to us today. "Nation would still rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There would still continue to be great earthquakes, famines and plagues, dreadful portents and signs from heaven". Life will go on for who knows for how many millennia. Rulers will change; systems will be created, function and die; nation will follow upon nation. But the dynamics will continue to remain the same. Political systems lusting for power and consequently oppressing those used for the sake of the system; greed-driven economic systems exploiting their own people, religious and values-creating systems controlling people's responses – the more the public scene will change, the more it will remain the same. One group after another will seek to dominate and take advantage of the people. But all will seek to

dominate. And eventually, this dynamic will reach its denouement, as dominating system succeeds dominating system until the entire house-of-cards collapses and the end comes!

But as this inevitable social decay slowly winds down, what should be the role of God's people living in the midst of such disintegration? Jesus' insights are not at all encouraging. "Before all of this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls" (vss. 12-19).

No one likes a truth-teller – particularly no one in power! Jesus calls his followers to be, like him, truth-tellers – those people who, no matter what society they are in, expose the systems for the dominating, oppressive, exploitive powers they are, who are neither silenced nor seduced by those systems, but who always maintain the integrity of their biblical vision of the world as God created it to be. One must steadfastly proclaim the biblical dream of a politics of justice, an economics of shared wealth and equity, and a relational faith that together create a shalom community. And one must expose how the political, economic and religious systems of one's day subvert this vision out of greed, a lust for power and a need to dominate.

This is the Christian's task as it was Jesus' task, as both seek to be faithful to the biblical witness. But such faithfulness will gain only the animosity and hatred of the systems that will do anything to eliminate such a witness. "You will be brought before kings and governors, because of my name". But don't be worried about providing a defense. The truth will be your defense! As they hear your truth-telling, the leaders of the systems may decry what they hear, they may seek to shut you up, they may even kill you. But they will know that truth was spoken to them. And those who have heard it will know that truth was proclaimed in their hearing. The truth cannot be stopped. And the truth will set free those who embrace it!

Jesus then completes his mission call to the disciples with two rather strange sentences. "But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls" (vss. 18-19). What did Jesus mean by this?

Many years ago, when I was still young in the ministry and seeking to comprehend the fullness of God's call to me, I had the privilege of being a part of a group which was visiting with one of the true saints of the 20th century church who had stood tirelessly against the "principalities and powers" of his country. He was urging us to become fearless speakers of truth to power, when one of the people in the ground interrupted what he was saying. "But doing what you are suggesting is madness", the protestor said. "If I spoke and acted like you suggest to try to bring about change, they would attack me and tear my reputation to shreds".

"And then what?" this old saint asked. "What do you mean, then what? They could destroy my career."

“And then what?” “Then what? If I continued, they could ruin my reputation.”

“And then what?” “Well, then, they could beat me and throw me into prison.”

“And then what?” “Well, eventually, they could kill me.”

“And then what?” “What do you mean, ‘Then what’? There is no “then what” after that. I would be dead.”

“No, young man”, the old saint responded. “You do not understand what it means to be a Christian. There is a “then what” after that. You might be dead. But that is not the end, for you see, you would wake up in the arms of Jesus!”

“You would wake up in the arms of Jesus!” I thought to myself, “There’s no way to stop this man. There’s no intimidation big enough to stop this man – not even death itself. Because death is not something to be feared by him. Death, to him – not just theoretically, but actually – is nothing but gain, because you do the worst that you can do to him and you’re just obliging him the favor of waking up in the arms of Jesus!”

That is what I believe Jesus means by saying, “Not a hair of your head will perish.” It is not that the systems cannot punish, hurt or even kill you. It is that nothing the systems can do to you can intimidate you because their worst punishment becomes your reward of “waking up in the arms of Jesus”. Thus, Jesus promises, “by your endurance, you will gain your soul!”

II Thessalonians 3:6-13 is best understood out of the context of Acts 2:43-47 and Acts 4:32-37. These passages tells us that the earliest Christian church practiced a stewardship of equality, in which those with wealth “would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” so that “all things were held in common” and “there was not a needy person among them”. This redistribution of wealth in community was done because this was an acting out of the Hebrew concept of Jubilee, the underlying Old Testament economic principle for the sustaining of the shalom community (or “kingdom of God”, as Jesus called it). What was remarkable about the Christian practice of Jubilee, however, was that it was practiced constantly by the Christians rather than once every 50 years (as the Jews were instructed to observe it). Therefore, the redistribution of wealth didn’t occur only once a generation but continuously. Consequently, the very construct of the Christian community guaranteed that wealth could not accumulate nor power accrue in the hands of a selected few while the bulk of the community lived in poverty or oppression.

As the church expanded into the Gentile world, it moved beyond a Hebrew culture which both understood and embraced Jubilee. But the Christian practice of Jubilee with its emphasis upon the equitable distribution of the community’s wealth to “any (who) had need”, so that “there was not a needy person among them” continued to be practiced in Gentile-dominated as well as Jewish-dominated churches. As Paul led the outreach of Christianity into the Gentile world, his epistles reflect both a continuing emphasis on the equitable sharing of wealth and a continuing concern that there be no needy among Christians. This concern extended beyond individuals,

even to the extent of financially-sound churches sharing their wealth with poorer churches so that there were no needy communities among the Body of Christ (Rom. 12:13, 15:26; II Cor. 6:4, 9:7-9, 12:10; Gal. 2:10; Eph. 4:28; Phil. 4:16, 19)!

Of course, as in any earthly community, there were those who took advantage of these economic practices of the church. Such was the situation in today's Epistle lesson.

Apparently, there were people in the church in Thessalonica who were more than willing to avail themselves of the sharing of food, goods and housing of those "who had all things in common". But they were not willing to contribute to the common good. They were not willing to work and to share the income generated by that work, but were centered only upon "living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work" (vs. 11). In other words, these Christians were willing to take advantage of the economic system of the church, but were not willing to contribute to it. Thus, they spent their time at leisure, lolling around, doing no work and engaging in gossip. And worse of all, they were hiding their laziness behind theological reflection, insisting that they did not work because Jesus was to return soon and they should prepare for his coming by spending their time in prayer, meditation and theological exploration (cf. I Thess. 5:14).

These people are, in the most frank terms possible, "free-loaders"! How does Paul deal with these free-loaders? First, he uses the example of his own life and the standards by which he lives. He writes, "For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate" (vss. 7-9). Apparently, whereas Paul normally received the gifts of a church for his ministry, he earlier recognized this emerging problem in Thessalonica of idleness and abuse of the Christian community. Therefore, he refused all gifts from the church (so that nothing could be misconstrued) and instead practiced his trade of tent-making while he was there in order to generate income for himself (which Paul then likely used for his own support and to contribute to the church coffers). Consequently, he feels free to urge all the Thessalonian Christians to "imitate us", and work for your living, as well.

Second, Paul specifically instructs all the Thessalonian Christians to work, generate the income for their lives, contribute their wealth to the church, and not seek to exploit the church because of their own laziness. "For even when we were with you," Paul writes, "we gave you this command: 'Anyone unwilling to work should not eat'. Now each person we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living" (vss. 10, 12). Thus, Paul issues a direct command: "work, earn your own living", and thus assume your fair share of building and sustaining the community of faith.

Finally, Paul instructs the Thessalonian Christians to ostracize those who refuse to work. It is important to note that Paul recognizes that these idle ones are still Christians; he directly calls them "believers". So he is not questioning their faith, only their irresponsible and even exploitive actions. But even though they are Christians, their practice of idleness is a most infectious disease to the church and will destroy its credibility and effectiveness if allowed to continue. Therefore, Paul instructs all the other Thessalonian Christians to "keep away from

those who are living in idleness” (vs. 6), “have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed (of their behavior)” (vs. 14). Ostracize them from your community; give them nothing to sustain themselves so that they will be forced to work. “Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers” (vs. 15), so that your ostracizing of them will bring them to their senses, they will recognize that the church will not tolerate such behavior, and they will be pressured to change their practices if they want to continue to be a part of your community!

Drastic action? Yes. But such action is required if both the Christian community is to be continued and its communal wealth used in truly beneficial and equitable ways rather than being abused by a few that would seek to exploit it for their own benefit! This is the hard-headed but warm-hearted actions required of those who truly want to build Christian community.

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