

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dcn. Keith McKenna at St. Augustine's Church on November 24, 25, 2007, Year C

Jeremiah 23: 1-6; Psalm 46; Colossians 1: 11-20; Luke 23; 35-43

One of my earliest mentors in the church was Father Jonathan Coffey, at the Church of St. James the Less in Scarsdale. I was his Christian Formation Coordinator, a kind of czar over all things kid. Among other duties I had the job of planning liturgy-related activities for the Sunday school. One morning in mid-October he said, by way of suggesting activity topics, going forward,

“I’m beginning to sniff Advent in the air.”

He didn’t say that he was hearing sleigh bells in his head, or seeing in his mind’s eye children playing in the snow in the churchyard, and he certainly was not saying that we needed to start directing the children’s attention toward Christmas.

The sensory image he was forming had nothing to do with holly and spiced punch.

What he was describing was the smell of smoke, and possibly of sulphur –the smell of trial and tribulation.

This is [Tomorrow will be] the last Sunday before Advent. It is the last Sunday in the great green teaching season that stretches from the Day of Pentecost to this present moment. It is the last chance to say something before the great turning wheel of the sacred year, the Ordo, comes round to what might, this year, be the final day, or, as some think, the beginning of the Great Tribulation.

The Lectionary editors had this in mind as they selected today’s texts.

Here’s Jeremiah, never a light-hearted guy, voicing the oracular God, giving the rulers of Israel a thumping for their failure to care for the people, and pointing straight to the Babylonians at the gate, who were about to overwhelm Jerusalem.

I will save a righteous remnant, says God, but only after much tribulation.

And here’s the Psalmist, preaching the comfort of Faith in God, a comfort that comes in the face of trial and suffering and tribulation.

And here’s today’s epistle: It was written to the church at Colossae when that church was troubled by preachers who were introducing variant, scary ideas. The writer exhorts the church to remember the core teachings: the forgiveness of sins, and the comfort of the Kingdom. God has rescued the people from the

power of darkness he says, and only by keeping to those core teachings will the people be able to "...endure everything with patience." Only in that way, he is saying, will they be able to endure the tribulation that is to come.

And here, finally, is the Gospel. Luke gives us Jesus in his tribulation on the cross, listening to the taunts of the latter-day rulers of Israel, and the mockery of the Roman Gestapo men. They call him the "King of the Jews" but they are contemptuous. The criminal on the cross to the left of him demands sarcastically that he use his power as the alleged Messiah to get them out of this mess.

The one on the right objects. "We deserve what we're getting, he says, but this man between us hasn't done anything wrong, and doesn't deserve to suffer this way."

All three, nevertheless, have been through a time of trial, and now, together, they suffer the tribulation of the cross. At this moment they, and we, are still in the world. Only one is sure of his destination.

Since 1979 our prayerbook has offered us a variant reading of the Lord's Prayer. Instead of the distant and abstract "...deliver us from evil," it reads "Save us from the Time of Trial." I've read another variant which reads: "Save us when the Time of Trial comes." I think these are much closer to our existential truth than "...deliver us from evil".

To understand this, think about Jeremiah. He is explicit in his assertion that the evil is not in the invader outside the gates. The evil is in the failed leaders of the people, the leaders the people have relied upon and trusted to protect them.

What we have learned over eons is that if leaders are corrupt, or self-serving, or evil, it is because the people have allowed them to be. The people are accountable for this. We can't be delivered from an evil that has been generated within us and which is of our own making. Not without a Time of Trial.

So here we stand, at the bar of God's justice, in the Time of Trial.

Is there any lawyer smart enough to talk up our acquittal, which is nothing less than our salvation? Is there any jury of peers capable of even understanding, much less forgiving, our sins, all of them, the worst of them, the most cowardly and contemptible of them? Is there any human court supreme enough to overlook in sentencing the enormity of what we have done, and what we have left undone?

Today's Gospel passage tells us that we have no need of any of that. All we need to do is acknowledge our sins; all we need to do after that is to ask for entry

into the Kingdom, and it will be given. If we are up to those two acts of faith, when the Time of Trial comes, we will be with him in Paradise.