

A Sermon for the Sunday Next Before Advent, November 23, 2008

The Rev'd Stephen C. Scarlett

For the last five weeks, our Introit has been taken from Jeremiah 29:11-14. God says, through Jeremiah, "I know the thoughts that I think towards you. Thoughts of peace and not of affliction. You shall call upon me and I will hearken unto you and turn away your captivity from every nation."

The setting for these words is the Babylonian captivity of Israel. At the end of the Old Testament, in judgment on Israel's sin, the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and carried the people away into exile in Babylon.

The message from God through Jeremiah was the promise of better things in the future. God, who scattered Israel from the Promised Land in judgment, would re-gather Israel to the land. Israel would once again enjoy God's favor and blessing.

This is the theme of our epistle lesson, which is also from Jeremiah (23:5f.). God promised to bring back the northern and southern kingdoms to the land. This new act of redemption would be so significant that it would supplant the Exodus as the focus of Israel's faith:

They shall no more say, The LORD liveth, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; But, The LORD liveth, which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel...from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land (KJV).

This re-gathering would take place under a king, a righteous descendant of King David.

Now, the physical movement of Israel represents a spiritual movement. The exile of Israel from the land was a movement away from God's presence. The promise of return was a promise of forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

These themes are seen in the Bible's first exile, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. Their departure from the garden was a separation from the presence of God. The question the rest of the Bible deals with is how to get back to Eden. This is why the last biblical picture of redemption in Revelation 22 is a picture of return to the garden paradise.

The story of exile and return illustrates two central themes of the Bible, sin and redemption. Through sin, humanity is alienated from God. Through redemption, humanity is reconciled with God and brought back into his presence.

It is through the ministry of Jesus that God carries out this great re-gathering. Jesus takes fallen, sinful humans like we, who are alienated from God's presence on account of sin, and brings us back into God's presence through forgiveness.

The word *repent* means to return, to come back. Jesus called Israel to repent, to return to God. The ministry of Jesus was the sign that the great re-gathering was beginning. This re-gathering is seen in

the call of our patron, St. Matthew, and other tax collectors and sinners. People who had disobeyed God were being called to change and return to fellowship with God.

This is the main point of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Because of his disobedience and disregard for the will of his father, the prodigal left his father's house and became enslaved in a foreign country. Through repentance he returned to the father, who welcomed him back into his home. Jesus used this parable to explain what was happening through his ministry.

The feeding of the multitudes in the gospel (John 6:5f.) is a picture of the re-gathering of Israel. The multitudes represent the people of Israel who were, as Jesus said, "scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd" (Matthew 9:36). Jesus, the royal descendent of David, gathers them around himself and feeds them. As God said through Ezekiel,

I will...gather [my sheep] from the countries, and will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel" (34:12-14).

In the gospel, St. John makes it clear that the feeding is connected with God's promise to re-gather Israel. After the feeding, Jesus said to the apostles, "Gather up the fragments that remain that nothing be lost." St. John tells us that twelve baskets were gathered—twelve being a symbolic reference to the tribes of Israel. The twelve apostles, representing the twelve tribes, gather up the dispersed remnant of Israel.

The feeding of the multitudes points to the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the place where the church reenacts the story of the new Exodus. We, who are scattered away from God's presence on account of sin, are re-gathered to God through the cross. As we gather to "eat this bread and drink this cup" and "proclaim the Lord's death till he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26), the words of Jeremiah in the lesson are fulfilled. This celebration has supplanted the Exodus as the central focus of our faith.

We continually return to God at the altar. We have a tendency to drift away from God over time. We get caught up in the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. We feel guilty and distant from God. Through the liturgy we repent. We confess our sins and are reconciled with the Father through Jesus. We return to the land and to paradise. We eat again of the Tree of Life and live.

As God said, "I know the thoughts that I think towards you. Thoughts of peace and not of affliction. You shall call upon me and I will hearken unto you and turn away your captivity from every nation."