

OPENING COLLECT

Almighty and eternal God, you have kindled the flame of love in the hearts of the saints: grant to us the same faith and power of love, that, as we rejoice in their triumphs, we may be sustained by their example and fellowship; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

FIRST READING: Micah 3.5-12

5 Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry 'Peace' when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths. 6 Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without revelation. The sun shall go down upon the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; 7 the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God. 8 But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin. 9 Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob and chiefs of the house of Israel, who abhor justice and pervert all equity, 10 who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! 11 Its rulers give judgement for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the LORD and say, 'Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us.' 12 Therefore because of you Zion shall be ploughed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

Micah, the prophet of the LORD, was at work in the C.8th. and like others (Amos, Hosea etc.) he sees that the people of God are not living the sort of life which God requires. There is no true justice (v.9), the priests are not really concerned for the nurture of the people (v.11), and the prophets are lining their pockets (v.5)! This is a situation, which cannot continue, and so the prophet speaks of the coming judgement of God. "Zion shall be ploughed, Jerusalem become a ruin and the mountain of the house a wooded height". At one level, this happens, when, first the North is overrun by the Assyrians, and then the South by the Babylonians. But, after the return from exile in Babylon, the people of God are still in subjection, and so they seem to have scanned the Scriptures in order to understand their fate, and to have picked up passages, like this one from Micah, as though they spoke not just about their past history but about the coming judgement of God, after which a new world will dawn for God's people. This 'apocalyptic' thinking is what is reflected in today's Gospel.

SECOND READING: 1 Thessalonians 2.9-13

9 You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the Gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was towards you believers. 11 As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, 12 urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Although the disciples, in today's Gospel, seem to be looking ahead to the new age, Christians believe it dawned in Christ. So, as we have already seen, in this Epistle, Paul's ministry to the Thessalonians is Kingdom based. He is, therefore, a good example of a leader who cares and nurtures, and a sharp contrast to their own religious leaders, pictured by Micah. Examples are to be followed, and we, and they, are called into a new life with God, so that 'God's word should be at work in us' (v.13). We need to live the Christian way now, not in order that we may come into 'God's kingdom and glory', in the future, but so

that we may enter it now, and live for the sake of all others.

Epistle continued:

¹³ We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

Only in this way is the longed for Kingdom, sensed in Micah, and spoken of in the Gospel, experienced, and seen to be on offer now to all.

Gospel: Matthew 24.1-14

¹ As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² Then he asked them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.' ³ When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' ⁴ Jesus answered them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, "I am the Messiah!" and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: ⁸ all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs. ⁹ Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. ¹⁰ Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.'

As we prepare for Advent, we turn this week, in our reading of Matthew's Gospel, to the material, which is termed 'apocalyptic', as it claims to 'uncover' or reveal the future. Matthew develops material from Mark 13, which is, itself, based on Jewish apocalyptic thinking, seen, for example, in the book Daniel and in today's passage from Micah. The Jews, of Jesus' time, looked for a period of turmoil on earth, during which God would help his people to come out on top. When it never came, they looked for an anguished end of this age, and the bringing in of a new age, in which the righteous would get their just reward. In both cases, a Messiah, an anointed one, would herald the new time. This is what gave John the Baptist's ministry its importance as John pointed ahead to Jesus as 'one mightier than I', and the herald of the Kingdom. However, here in Matthew 24, Jesus seems to look ahead to the new age, which will only come about after judgement, and be heralded by his return (v.3). He then calls for 'endurance' in the faith whatever happens (v.13), and the proclamation of the good news worldwide. Hence the importance of today's Epistle for our discipleship, and of Jesus' words in v.13. We must work tirelessly to make the Kingdom a present reality in the lives of all.

Post-Communion Collect:

Lord of heaven, in this Eucharist you have brought us near to an innumerable company of angels and to the spirits of the saints made perfect: as in this food of our earthly pilgrimage we have shared their fellowship, so may we come to share their joy in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.