

Previous to our reading, the Prophet Joel has been admonishing the priest of the Lord to call a fast for all the people. They shall go to the Temple to bewail the disruption of their covenant relationship with God. God has withheld the produce of the vine and the olive tree, so that it is impossible to commune with God by the usual sacrificial offerings. There has been a devastating plague of locusts followed by a drought.

The Israelites believed that there was a direct connection between their sinful behavior and natural disasters. After all, God is the creator and sustainer of the world. If we disdain God and take his provision for granted wouldn't there be consequences from God? When I read this, I think about how we treat God's creation. Is it any wonder that there are wildfires, droughts and floods? Is God calling us to repent?

But Joel now reassures them that God will not abandon Israel. He is waiting for them to repent so he can restore his covenant with them. God will again give the rains as before. There will be an abundance of grain, wine, and oil. They shall praise the name of God and rejoice in his provision. They will know that God is in the midst of them and he is their God and there is no other.

Afterward, Joel says (and we have no indication of the time) God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh. This will be manifested in dreams, visions and prophecy. Before the great and terrible day of the Lord, when God establishes his reign, there will be signs and portents on earth and in the heavens. BUT everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved.

What are we to make of all this? For one thing, our relationship with God or lack thereof, has consequences for how we treat creation and each other. Do we need to repent?

Secondly God's kingdom has begun to be manifested on earth. In the coming of Jesus Christ, God's kingdom is breaking into our world. According to the New Interpreter's Commentary "the Promise is that nothing in all creation will separate those who trust in God's work in Jesus Christ from God's loving presence".

Paul's second letter to Timothy is a goodbye letter. He knows that soon he will be put on trial before Nero and the end result will be his execution. Looking over his life he has confidence that God will receive him when he departs this life and crown him with righteousness. He did not think of his life as being taken from him, but as being offered to God. Ever since his conversion on the Damascus Road, he had offered everything to God. He put his intellect, his health, his devotion, his strength into Jesus' commission to convert the Gentiles.

Paul has successfully completed his assignment. He says, "I have fought the good fight; I have completed the race; I have kept the faith". He fulfilled the commission he received from

Jesus. When he says “I have fought the good fight”, he is comparing his struggles to combat in the arena. It takes perseverance to keep the faith. Through shipwrecks, betrayals, or perils, he could say he never lost his faith in Jesus.

Paul knows that his death is not the end but a release to a better life. I would like to be as confident as Paul when by time comes.

This parable from the Gospel of Luke seems simple. It is a contrast of two men who go to the Temple to pray. Devout Jews prayed 3 times a day: 9am, 12noon and 3pm. Sound familiar? Prayer offered to God in the Temple was considered especially auspicious. Let’s look at how these two men pray to God.

The Pharisee stands off by himself so as to preserve his purity before God. His piety is very impressive. He says that he is not like others who are sinners, especially the tax collector over there. The only obligatory fast was on Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. He fasts twice a week in addition. Certain things were mandatory to be tithed to God, but he tithes everything even when he is not required to, Barclay puts it splendidly, “He did not really pray to God. The Pharisee was giving himself a testimonial before God”.

The tax collector knows very well that he is a sinner. He stands off in a corner and doesn’t dare lift his hands or eyes to God. He has nothing to commend himself to God. Instead, he pleads for God’s mercy. He says, “Have mercy on me a sinner”. The Eastern Orthodox extract from this prayer a way to pray continuously. It is called the Jesus Prayer. “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” It has the advantage of faith toward God and honesty about ourselves. What more needs to be prayed?

So why does Jesus say that the tax collector but not the Pharisee was justified? The Pharisee relies on his own righteousness and thinks he doesn’t need God’s Grace. It may be because of the contempt in which the Pharisee held the tax collector.

To quote the New Interpreter’s Commentary, “The nature of grace is paradoxical: it can be received only by those who have learned empathy for others”.

Do we rely on our own exemplary keeping of the Rule and Customary to secure our relationship to God? Do we look down at or gossip about how other Sisters keep Retreat Day or are late to offices?

Let us pray the Jesus Prayer together:

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Have Mercy On Me a Sinner”.

