

Pentecost 24 B 2009

In the name of Jesus

He who has promised is faithful. God does what he says he will do. We hold the Bible to be the very word of God, so we believe that what God says will actually happen. In our reading from Hebrews we hear, “he who has promised is faithful.” Today’s readings are full of promises. Let’s take a look at the things that will surely take place.

“There shall be a time of anguish.” When I read this I think of a time when I had severe abdominal pain. I was completely incapacitated. I was unable to do anything besides put my hands around my belly and wish I were dead. I’ve also had emotional pain in my life as well as fear. The fear I experienced was so great that I cannot imagine anything beyond it, but whether physical or emotional the text says the anguish to come will be such as has never occurred since nations have come into existence. So, my little stomach problem and moments of grief and fear are nothing in comparison with what is to come. This is difficult to believe. It doesn’t seem real. Here we are in our comfortable homes with our comfortable lives. We are insulated to some extent from the terrible things that we see in the papers and on TV.

The disciples of Jesus were a bit more exposed to violent deaths and tragedy than we are, after all they actually had public executions and other forms of discipline back then. But even so, they weren’t prepared for what they heard from their master’s lips. Imagine the promise that Jesus gives concerning the temple of Jerusalem. He said that all of the stones of that great building would be thrown down. To them this was Inconceivable. But let’s go back to 1991. My Dad took me to the front of the World trade center. I saw this magnificent structure. And I would never have guessed that anything could happen to it. In 1993 a 1500 pound bomb was detonated in the parking structure blowing a hole in the side of the building 30 meters wide, but even with this great gaping hole the World trade center did not fall. Who would have ever dreamed that this great structure would be demolished in a few fleeting moments? This was beyond imagination, but in 2001 that is exactly what happened. What God says doesn’t depend on our beliefs. Jesus said that the temple would be destroyed. And that was a promise. As you probably know there is no temple in Jerusalem. It has been destroyed.

Unbelief always has an answer to God’s promises, so rather than taking Jesus’ words to heart many scholars assume that dishonest apostles wrote this prediction, after the fact, merely making Christ’s words appear to be prophetic. Another way to deal with words that you don’t like is to teach something else. Jesus promised his disciples that false religious leaders would come. And now we see a grand catalog of religious options to Jesus. Many people will be led astray.

Jesus continued saying, “When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place.” We have God’s word that this will happen. We also have the sure promise of famines and earthquakes. We’ve seen these things fulfilled already. We have wars, earthquakes, starvation and false religions. Our news stations are saturated with reports of all of these things. But in the end there is one prediction that is worse than all of the others. False teaching is the worst. A bullet can take away my life, I can starve to death or be crushed in an earthquake, but false teaching can lead me into eternal judgment.

It is not politically correct to talk about death. And it is also not polite to tell others that their beliefs are wrong. So when we look at today’s readings we find that they are twice as unacceptable as usual. They talk about death and false gods. People might not want to hear it, but can we really afford to keep our mouths shut?

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The awful things that will happen on this earth are not even worth mentioning in comparison to the day of the Lord. On that day, “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” This is a promise. We will all be raised from the dead to face judgment. Anyone who is unworthy will be punished. False religions teach people to turn to false gods and to put their hope in things that can not save them.

The funny thing about all the false religions is that none of them are even claiming to rescue us from death or forgive our sins. No one else is a savior. They all demand something. False religions direct people to do things that will turn God’s anger from them on the Day of Judgment. Buddha’s last words were, “Work hard to gain your own salvation.” The psalmist gives us some good advice. He says. “Their sacrifices I will not offer.” Because that is not how God works. “Every priest stands day after day offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.” And the false religions continue this futile practice. We see fasting and acts of charity and payment of money, time, and possessions. But these sacrifices can never take away sin. People take the names of other gods on their lips and the ones who do this will have their troubles multiplied. This is a promise. And He who has promised is faithful.

We don’t like judgment. We fight it whenever we get the chance. But when we say, “a loving God would never allow anyone to go to hell” we are degrading and ignoring the price that Jesus paid for all sin. When we hold the hope that God will not punish people who reject his Son, we are putting ourselves in danger. When we speak this way, we are rejecting the only thing that can save us. To say that it is not necessary to trust God’s promises is to say that Jesus’ death is irrelevant. We judge God to be unloving because he is just and true. We have the desire to water down the law of God and believe that there will be no day reckoning. And we do this in the name of love.

So, what would a loving God do? A loving God would save everyone. Wouldn’t he? Yes he would and he did. “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” Make no mistake Jesus has paid for the sins of every Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, and every Jehovah’s Witness. There isn’t a man, woman or child on the face of the planet, whose sins have not been paid for. This is the promise. And all people will stand before God. All people will give an account for their actions. When it’s your turn, will you say “I’ve done my best”? Or will you say, “I am totally unworthy, but Jesus is my righteousness”?

Do you have a father or a mother or a brother anyone around you who hasn’t heard the Good news? What would love do? The Day of Judgment is coming, and everyone everywhere needs to hear the good news. We can share the promises that we’ve been given. Our reading from Daniel speaks of the glory of leading many to righteousness. He is talking about our role in salvation. You and I, who can do nothing to save ourselves, have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation. When we hear that we should “provoke one another to good deeds” I can’t think of a better deed than sharing the priceless gift of salvation with others. This is why Daniel tells us that we will shine like the stars forever and ever.

A USC student named Chase Edler died this week, but his father and sister have taken this opportunity to tell the USC community about the hope they have. Chase knew the promises of Jesus. Chase knew that his eternal life was purchased by God’s Son. So while there is a painful loss of a brother and a son, Chase’s family shares their message that this is not the end.

Today, I will talk about death and I don’t care who hears or what people think, because I can speak of God’s sure promises. The dead will rise and we have the promise that we will rise to everlasting life. You will be delivered, because your names are written in the book of life. We don’t look to the sacrifices that other people give to their gods, because “Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins.” And with this comes the promise, “I will remember your sins and lawless deeds no more.” You and I can say,

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“Protect me oh God I take refuge in you.” And he listens. And the promises just keep coming. “Where there is forgiveness there is no longer any offering for sin.” We have confidence to enter into God’s presence without fear for we have the blood of Jesus, the one time payment that endures forever. And the promises get personal. For God’s sure clear promise we don’t need to look any further than the text right before us. He has given you his sign. He has sprinkled your heart to give you a clean conscience and he has washed you with pure water, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so that you may know he has made you presentable before his throne for the day he returns. We can hold fast to this hope. He tells us we can because he who has promised is faithful. In the name of Jesus.