

## *November 18 Second Sunday Before Advent*

**READINGS:** Luke 21:5-19; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 Malachi 4:1-2a; Psalm 98

### *SERMON A*

I wonder how many of us see the coming of the Lord to judge the world as something to look forward to. Come on, let's be honest about it. But for the psalmist, the coming of the Lord 'to judge the world in righteousness' is something to get excited about! – remember these words from our praise shout earlier: "Let loose and sing! Strike up the band! Fill the air with praises to God the King. Let the sea and its fish give a round of applause, with everything living on earth joining in. Let ocean breakers call out, "Encore!" and mountains harmonize the finale –a tribute to God when he comes to straighten out the whole world, when he comes to put the world right, and everyone in it." And for many people in today's world who are oppressed and long for justice, this rings bells.

The hope of justice one day, the hope that God will come 'to judge the world in righteousness', the hope that God will come to straighten out the whole world – this hope helps us to persevere when times are tough. Not that tough times would surprise his first disciples. For Jesus warned them that difficult days were coming their way. In the gospel reading, Jesus spoke both of the destruction of the temple and the rest of Jerusalem (which happened about 40 years later in AD 70) and also of the end of the age. The trials of the one historical event would foreshadow the coming judgement. Before the end came there would be numerous wars, revolutions, earthquakes, famines and plagues. False prophets would arise and deceive many. Jesus' disciples would be persecuted and put on trial. But even if their families rejected them, his disciples would be challenged and called to stand firm in their faith. And the warning and challenge that Jesus gave to his first friends, he has given to his friends in every age and gives to us, his friends today. Following Jesus does lead to a life full of faith and hope, but following Jesus is no picnic. Here's how *The Message* translation puts that warning and that challenge: "You'll even be turned in by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. Some of you will be killed. There's no telling who will hate you because of me. Even so, every detail of your body and soul – even the hairs of your head!

– is in my care; nothing of you will be lost. Staying with it – that’s what is required. Stay with it to the end. You won’t be sorry; you’ll be saved.”

In the reading from his second letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul emphasises another aspect of what it means to follow Jesus. We should never think that because Jesus is coming back that this gives us an excuse to down tools and give up earning our living. When he comes he expects to find us busy with the tasks he has assigned us. And these include ordinary everyday duties as well as more ‘spiritual’ activities like prayer or witnessing. We need a whole-life discipleship that sees every part of life as under God’s direction and that never tires of ‘doing what is good and right’. As Malachi urges us, our basic attitude in life must be that we revere and honour the Lord’s name. We do everything we do as under his eye, and with the aim of pleasing him. As Paul says elsewhere, we are to ‘serve wholeheartedly, as if...serving the Lord, not people’, determined that whatever we do, whether in word or deed, we ‘do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.’

## *SERMON B*

We should not trivialise the troubles the first followers of Jesus faced as they struggled to follow his way in the years after his ascension into heaven: the suspicion, nastiness, scrutiny and jealousy that may have come from the people around them, the attempts to ‘catch them out’ in not living up to the claims they made about Jesus and the new life he offered them.

Nor should we belittle the persecution which Christians in other ages and places have endured and survived, simply because they were believers.

Nor should we make light of the tough times and difficult days that some of our Christian sisters and brothers here in Penicuik have been put through by colleagues, neighbours and others, for no other reason than that they were Christians.

So three things are vital:

- the mutual support of the North Kirk family which we give to and receive from each other and on which we depend – some of our songs this morning are about this mutual support;
- the mutual prayers of the North Kirk family, praying for each other and knowing we are being prayed for;
- the unconditional support that God gives us and the huge resources he makes available – other songs this morning are about his support which will never run out.

But this morning I want to tell you a little about Christians around the world who are suffering severe persecution because of their commitment to following Jesus through tough times. I’ll focus on three countries.

**China.** There are two major Church movements in China: the official Three Self Church and the unregistered house-church movement. House-church pastors and believers are under huge pressure to be registered and aligned with the official Three Self Church, and when they refuse they are punished. The persecution ranges from fines and Bible confiscation to destruction of house-church buildings. When these Christians, both men and women, consistently continue preaching, evangelising and passing on literature, they are arrested, beaten, tortured, interrogated, imprisoned and sometimes even killed. Being a Christian may no longer be illegal in China, but our fellow-Christians, especially in the unofficial house-church movement, are suffering severe persecution. There is also

a severe shortage of Bibles.

**Eritrea.** Since 2002 the Eritrean government has been trying to make evangelical Christians abandon their faith. Christians are not permitted to meet together in worship, churches are forced to close and members are arrested and tortured and can be imprisoned for months or years without trial.

**North Korea** North Korea is one of the worst violators of religious rights for Christians. Media attention was focused on the country in 2006 but nothing has changed for the North Korean people and everyday life in North Korea is inhuman. More Christians were arrested in 2006 than in 2005 and between 50,000 and 70,000 Christians are currently suffering in prison camps. Many of them are tortured. Because it considers Christianity to be a tremendous threat to stability in the country, the North Korean government hunts Christians in every corner of the land, many being arrested, tortured and even killed during this period of relentless persecution.

So let us commit ourselves to pray for the Christians we've heard about and the countless others we haven't – I'll give you a couple of websites at the end where you can learn of other persecuted Christians. In this way we'll support our fellow-believers in what really are the toughest of situations.

What an amazing amount of care and love is expressed and what wonderful promises are made in Jesus' words to his disciples that we hear in today's Gospel reading: "You'll end up on the witness stand, called to testify. Make up your mind right now not to worry about it. I'll give you the words and wisdom that will reduce all your accusers to stammers and stutters...every detail of your body and soul – even the hairs of your head! – is in my care; nothing of you will be lost." Jesus has not abandoned his followers! We follow the same God and we can be confident that he will be with us and our fellow-Christians around the world, that he will help us all as we seek to follow Jesus, and that he will hear and act when we pray to him for our persecuted fellow-Christians.