Comments **Year A**

Sunday between November 13 and 19 inclusive
Proper 28, Ordinary/Lectionary 33
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

Judges 4:1-7 NRSV

Joshua is dead; Israel is now under the influence of 12 successive *judges*, charismatic leaders raised up at times of national crisis by the spirit of God, to deliver God's people from pagan oppressors. Judges honestly admits that Israel does not control all of the Canaan; because they "did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (v. 1, 3:12 and elsewhere), they were subjugated by other peoples from time to time. Conquest was a gradual process, with many reverses.

The preceding passage, 3:12-30, tells the story of "Ehud" (4:1), a *judge*, a national hero who put an end to domination by the Moabites, the people who lived to the southeast of the Dead Sea. He carried the tribute to Eglon, King of Moab. He tricked Eglon into seeing him in private to hear a secret message from God. Ehud took his concealed sword and assassinated Eglon. Without a leader, the Moabites were in confusion; Ehud was then able to lead the Israelites to victory over the Moabites. God sometimes works in strange ways!

Once again the Israelites disobey God, and so are subjugated: this time by "Jabin" (v. 2), a king who rules at "Hazor" (north of the Sea of Galilee); "Sisera" is his chariot commander. The forces of Jabin are awesome, especially because the Israelites, lacking chariots, are no match for his army on level ground. "Deborah" (v. 4), the fourth of the *judges*, is different from others: she acts as God's spokeswoman in matters of national importance and societal disputes ("judgement", v. 5) but leaves military leadership to "Barak" (v. 6). She orders him, in God's name, to assemble troops drawn from northern tribes ("Naphtali" and "Zebulun") on Mount Tabor. There, God will "draw out" (v. 7) the enemy, and will give Israel victory. The following verses describe the battle. Due to a heavy rainstorm or to the "Kishon" river overflowing its banks (or to both), Sisera's chariots become mired in the mud, and his troops panic. Sisera and all his troops are killed. Israel is once again free.

Psalm 123 NRSV

This is a prayer for deliverance from enemies. Vv. 1-3 speak of humble submission to God's will (note "servants"–"masters" and "maid"–"mistress", v. 2). We look with our "eyes" to God, seeking his "mercy" (v. 3). The speakers (Israel or an oppressed group within Israel) seek God's help, his mercy, having had their fill of "contempt" (v. 4), "scorn" of the powerful, and derision.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 NRSV

Paul has just told the Thessalonian Christians that, at the end of the age, both the faithful who have already died and those still alive will ascend to heaven to be with God for ever. Now, he says, concerning when Christ will come again, you are well aware that he will come suddenly and unexpectedly ("like a thief in the night", v. 2). Others who are lulled by the "peace and security" (v. 3) will be separated from God for ever ("sudden destruction"), as suddenly as a "woman" comes into labour; God's condemnation of them will be inescapable.

Then, in vv. 4-8a, he exhorts his readers to moral vigilance. Being "children of light", (i.e. united with Christ, the *light* of the world), they will not be surprised by Christ's second coming. So let us not become careless and sinful ("fall asleep", v. 6) as others do, but let us be prepared. Let us have the sobriety of people who have peace of mind through trust in God. Sleep and drunkenness are attributes of *children of darkness*, those who ignore or oppose God's ways.

We are, (here he uses a military image) to possess the Christian virtues of "faith" (v. 8), "love" and "hope" – the certain hope of "salvation"; these virtues protect us from evil. For God has pre-ordained ("destined us", v. 9) that we are saved through Christ rather than being damned eternally ("wrath"). Jesus rescues us from sin, so that, whether we are alive ("awake", v. 10) or physically dead ("asleep") when he comes again, we will live with him in heaven. Finally, he advises his readers to "build up" (v. 11) each other, to support each other spiritually: here he sees the church as the temple of God under construction; the builder is God, and Christians can participate in the work.

Matthew 25:14-30 NRSV

Jesus continues to tell parables about the kingdom of heaven. In the previous parables, he has told us that we need to be prepared for the Second Coming at all times. Today's parable is set in the realm of finance. A master, before leaving on a journey, entrusts his slaves with his money, "each according to his ability" (v. 15). (A *talent* was about 15 years' wages for a labourer, a large sum of money.) Two servants invest the money and earn more (vv. 16, 17); the third simply buries it (v. 18). When the master returns (v. 19), he praises the investors; they, he says, will be made responsible for "many things" (vv. 21, 23), and will "enter into the joy of your master". But the third slave, admitting that he was afraid of his master's wrath (v. 24), simply returns the original sum (v. 25). The master chastises him for his wickedness and laziness. This slave loses what he has been given (v. 28) and is condemned to "outer darkness" (v. 30). This would have caused a stir in Jesus' day, for a rabbinic maxim commends burial of money as a way of protecting it.

But this parable is about the kingdom of heaven, so what is the lesson it teaches? "Weeping and gnashing of teeth" (v. 30) is a *stock phrase* for condemnation of the wicked at the Last Day. The master stands for God and the servants for various kinds of people. Yes, God both rewards generously and is a stern judge. He expects us to be good stewards of his gifts. We will be commended and rewarded for faithfully carrying out his mission. Failure to use what he gives us will result in punishment – by separation from him, the essence of goodness. We are expected to make his gifts grow. He is free to distribute them as he sees fit (vv. 28-29).