Comments **First Sunday of Advent** **Year B**

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.
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Isaiah 64:1-9 NRSV

This part of the book was probably written 530-510 BC, soon after Jews returned to Israel. In Chapter 63, God's action in delivering Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land is recalled: in spite of their waywardness, God was always with them, but now, in their sinfulness, he seems to have deserted them. As the writer asks in 63:17, "Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?". Please God, deliver your forsaken people from their sin, and restore the Temple!

Now, in 64:1-5a, the prophet prays to God: please reveal yourself as you did during the Exodus! "Fire" (v. 2) is a symbol of God's wondrous works: he showed his power to his (and Israel's) "adversaries": nations feared him. V. 4 sounds more like a pious hope than a fact. Note v. 5a: the emphasis is on God coming to Israel, rather than humans approaching God. V. 5b says that the people felt, in their waywardness, that God in his anger had hidden from them. In vv. 6-7, the writer, on behalf of the people, confesses their sin and hopelessness: they have become like one who is ceremonially "unclean". (During her period, a woman put on a "cloth" and was considered unclean.) The people feel like nothing at all, like chaff blown away by the "wind". Formerly, in times of distress Israel called on God, but no one does so now (v. 7). It is as though God has caused them to sin. Vv. 8-12 are a further petition to God: you are still "our Father". As clay does not ask what the potter is making with it, so we do not ask of you; we just do what you tell us. Please, Lord, relent from your anger; do not hold the sin which we have intentionally committed ("iniquity") against us for ever, for we are in essence "all your people". In Chapter 65 God replies: I was ready to be sought by you, but no one came seeking; I invited you, rebellious as you are – off worshipping other gods. A time will come when I will separate the ungodly from the godly, when the ungodly will suffer and die. Those remaining will inherit the Land, and I will make it plentiful and bless it.

Psalm 80:1-7,17-19 NRSV

Vv. 1-3 are a cry for help. Please God ("Shepherd of Israel"), you who lead the Israelite ("Joseph") people ("flock"), come to our military aid ("stir up your might", v. 2). (Joseph's sons were Ephraim and Manasseh; the tribal areas "Ephraim ... Manasseh" were in the northern kingdom, so this psalm comes from there. God was thought of as seated on the "cherubim" (v. 1), the half-human, half-animal figures on the Ark.) Vv. 3, 7 and 19 are a refrain: please take us back, God, into the covenant relationship with you! In 31:16, God's *face shining* is equivalent to "save me with your steadfast love". The nation's current plight is seen as due to God's anger. In vv. 8-13, the Exodus is likened to a vine; the vineyard is the Promised Land. God's creative acts ("mountains", v. 10, "cedars") stretch from the Mediterranean "sea" (v. 11) to the Euphrates "River". Why God, ask vv. 12-13, have you acted though our enemy, letting him occupy our land and lay waste to it? Please God, deliver us (v. 14); care for your people ("have regard for this vine"). May you destroy our enemy (v. 16b). Help our king ("the one ...", v. 17) whom you once "made strong". When you help him, we will be faithful to you for ever; we will come to know you intimately ("call on your name", v. 18).

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 NRSV

Paul greets his readers: he wishes them "grace" (God's freely given gift of love) and "peace" (the total state of well-being to which we are admitted through Christ): both come from the Father (as source) and the Son (as means or agent). In later chapters, Paul cautions his readers against misuse of *spiritual gifts* (v. 7), so in v. 5 he may be damning them with faint praise. He praises their eloquence ("speech") and understanding ("knowledge") but not (as in other letters) their faith, hope and love for each other and for Christ. In v. 6, "testimony" is *bearing witness*: God has strengthened them through their telling of the good news. They are indeed richly blessed (v. 7), but (as mentioned later), they tend to dwell on the excitement of the present rather than looking forward to "the revealing of ... Christ", his second coming. God will help them prepare for that day, so that they may be among those judged worthy of eternal life ("blameless", v. 8). God is "faithful" (v. 9): he will not abandon what he has begun. He has called them into "fellowship", union with other believers which is union with Christ.

Mark 13:24-37 NRSV

In v. 2, Jesus has prophesied the destruction of the Temple to the disciples. Then Peter, James, John and Andrew (the first four he called) have asked him: "when will this be ... ?" (v. 4). How will we know when "these things" are about to happen? He has told them of persecution, of strange natural phenomena, of societal breakdown, of the fate of the disciples. The portents will be wars, earthquakes and famines (vv. 7-8). The end will come suddenly; people will suffer greatly. It is only because God, in his mercy, has "cut short those days" (v. 20) that the *elect*, the godly, will be saved. Even they will be tempted by other *messiahs*.

Now we come to our reading. "In those days" (v. 24) there will be darkness: a sign of the coming of divine judgement (as in Isaiah 13:10). The elect will see "the Son of Man", a superhuman person with heavenly power and glory, coming to inherit his kingdom (v. 26, as prophesied Daniel 7:13). He will bring the godly together (as in Isaiah 11:11) from all over the world. (Winds were thought to originate at the four corners of the earth.) By implication, the "Son of Man" (v. 26) is the true Messiah, Christ come the second time. Jesus admonishes his followers to "keep alert" (v. 33) for this coming. The leafing of the "fig tree" (v. 28) is a sure harbinger of summer; similarly, when they see "these things", the End is near, very near (v. 29), but *when* is the Father's prerogative. The images are those of apocalyptic (vision of the future) literature, popular in Jesus' day.