

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
November 17, 2024 – 26 Pentecost
Daniel 12:1-3; Mark 13:1-8
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning our Collect invites us to take the Bible seriously, to “hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” the holy writings passed down to readers through many centuries. “Hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest.” This is a very thorough process and not one that happens by simply listening to the lessons in church. It's more than learning what is written as we read other writings for content alone. Of course, it is good to be familiar with the content of the Bible and quite an undertaking to learn about such ancient writings. But the Collect reminds us that our goal is more than that.

Our goal is to know scripture “by heart.” That expression comes near to the words “inwardly digest.” For in the Bible the heart signifies our thoughts and feelings and our wills. We are called – and we ask God to grant us the grace to hear this call – we are called to take scripture to heart, to let the overarching themes, the ethical teachings, and the vision of God's dream for humanity that we find in scripture shape how we live our lives.

Today our lesson from the Old Testament book of Daniel and the lesson from Mark's Gospel are linked by their focus on the end of time and the horrors that will precede the end of time. Some Christian groups take to heart certain messages of scripture that others prefer to leave alone. Lessons about the “end times” are an example. The Episcopal Church tends not to place emphasis on this, but we might still learn from today's lessons.

Daniel's vision of the end of human history is set in a very troubled time in Jewish history, the period in the 6th century BCE when the Jewish people were ruled by foreign powers, many were exiled in Babylonia, and their Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. The book of Daniel was actually written later, in 164 BCE, at another very troubled time in Jewish history. Our reading gives a message of hope for people being threatened and persecuted and sometimes killed. Michael, Israel's patron angel, will intervene to bring justice. The names of all who will be saved are written in the book of life, and even the faithful dead will awake to everlasting life to receive their reward. This idea of life after death – with reward and punishment – was a developing idea for Judaism at the time. Incidentally, in Jesus' day there were Jews, such as the Pharisees, who accepted this idea as well as those who rejected the belief in life after death. The same is true for Jewish people in our time.

Now let's turn to today's passage from Mark's Gospel, the beginning portion of chapter 13. The disciples have been admiring the apparent permanence and grandeur of the temple, but Jesus predicts its fall, when “not one stone will be left here upon another.” In fact, this temple was destroyed in the year 70 CE. Through to the end of chapter 13 Jesus talks about the horrors that will come – natural disasters as well as the persecution of his followers. He gives many warnings that the end is coming, though no

one except the Father knows when. Jesus' message is "Be alert! Keep awake!" In other words, be prepared for the end whenever it comes by trusting God and by remaining faithful to Jesus, the true Messiah.

We may tend to avoid talking about the end of time and the final judgment, but if we think about judgment in terms of justice, I believe we can appreciate that judgment is a good thing. We certainly know that many people do not receive justice in this life, even God's people – whether Jewish or Christian or so many others. People are destroyed by natural disasters through no fault of their own. People are destroyed by other people through no fault of their own. People suffer from circumstances they cannot avoid. People suffer from illnesses of all kinds. The causes of human misery so often seem to have little relation to a person's faithfulness or goodness. And surely in every age the wicked also prosper. Please read Psalm 73 for a very wise description of how terribly difficult that is to witness, as we know all too well.

So, how then can we understand God's righteousness? By positing justice after death as well as at the end of time. As in the book of Daniel – and in Christian understanding – we can have faith in life after death when the righteous, the wise, the faithful will rise to everlasting life and, in the words of the psalmist, when "those who are far from [God] will perish" (Psalm 73:27). In every time of trouble in history people who believe in God are challenged to understand where God is and why God does not intervene to stop injustice and violence. And in every time of trouble in history there appear visions or ideas that help people understand, that put injustice into a perspective that offers hope. It boils down to this – God will bring justice, but it may be after our death.

In this morning's Collect we ask God to help us hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest scripture for a reason: "that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life." We may hope for God's righteous judgment and justice after our death and at the end of all time. Scripture supports us in the hope that God's truth and God's life and God's love will ultimately prevail. The world did its worst to Jesus. Yet the resurrection of Christ teaches us the lesson that death and evil did not have the last word and will not have the last word.

The challenge for all of us who are living in the time between the promise of God's kingdom and the coming of God's kingdom is to keep God's dream for humanity and for creation in our minds and in our hearts as we live our lives in the world as it is now. We are tempted to put our trust in what is less than God, to hope for less than the coming of God's kingdom. Christian faith is about letting God's dream shape what we do. Now, while we are here in this time of history, we have the opportunity to align ourselves and our lives with God's dream. We can "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God," in the words of God given to the prophet Micah. We can follow the teaching of Jesus by our compassion in action. We can be faithful witnesses to God's dream, always remembering that all our hope is founded on God, who is faithful.

In Jesus' name. Amen.