

### ***Already and Not Yet***

In the name of him who is coming to judge the earth, dear friends in Christ: In today's Old Testament reading from the prophet Ezekiel the Lord promises to gather the scattered sheep of his flock and feed them on the mountains of the Promised Land. It's a great text, but on the surface sounds better suited to Good Shepherd Sunday than this, the Last Sunday of the Church year. If we dig a little deeper, however, we'll see that it fits the bill for today quite nicely.

What we have before us is what's called a *typological* prophecy, that is, a prophecy in which there is a fairly immediate, small scale fulfillment which in turn points ahead to a later, more significant, complete fulfillment. A good example of this is when King David was planning to build the Temple of the Lord. Through the prophet Nathan, he was told no. David had been a man of war for most of his life, and the Lord wanted his Temple built by a man of peace. But the Lord promised David that one of his direct descendants would build the Temple. In the short term that happened. David's son Solomon, who was a man of peace, built the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. That Temple, made of limestone and marble, didn't last. But then, it wasn't meant to. That Temple and its builder were meant to point ahead to the greater Son of David, *the Prince of Peace*, who would build the everlasting Temple made of living stones that is the Christian Church. So, Nathan's prophecy about a descendant of David building a Temple has two fulfillments. Solomon and the Temple he built are types or foreshadows of Jesus and the Church that he is building even today.

Such typological prophecies occur frequently in the Scripture; there are many other examples I could cite. But what makes Ezekiel's prophecy that we have before us this morning a bit unusual is that it has an immediate fulfillment, and then not one but *two* greater fulfillments; the second of these far surpassing the first. They keep stepping up.

But to see how this works, we have to go back to the original context in which the prophecy first occurred. Ezekiel was God's spokesman to the Judeans who were taken into exile early in the sixth century before Christ. In that day the Babylonian Empire ruled the civilized world – including the small country of Judah. Conquered nations were forced to pay heavy taxes and tribute to their Babylonian masters. As you can guess, nobody except the Babylonians much cared for the arrangement. So, it happened from time to time that one or more conquered nations, feeling that their overlords had grown weak and complacent while we had become lean and mean, would rebel. They'd say, "We're not paying the tribute taxes any more. So there. What are you going to do about it?" It was a calculated risk. The hope was their imperial overlords would be too weak or too preoccupied with bigger problems in other corners of their empire to do anything. Failing that, the hope was if they sent an army to force us back into submission, it wouldn't be big or powerful enough to do the job. We could defeat that force. Of course, the worst case would be for them to send an overwhelming army that would crush our rebellion, and then we'd have the devil to pay. Big empires like big bullies didn't like being mocked by weaker subordinates. And they may then pay for it. They wanted everyone to know it was a mistake to rebel and make them angry.

Well, it happened that most of the kings in the line of David during this period of history were not very faithful to the Lord. They were allowing and even encouraging all kinds of idolatry and pagan practices to thrive among God's people. In fact, that's why the Lord allowed the nation of Judah to come under Babylonian domination. It was meant as a way to increase

hardship and get the people and their leaders to repent and return to him. *That*, the true prophets of the Lord kept saying, was the solution to the problem.

But the leaders of Judah didn't want to repent and return to the Lord. Instead, they imagined themselves to be shrewd politicians and masters of intrigue. Like addicted gamblers, they kept playing the game of "Let's rebel against Babylon and see if we get away with it this time". It was always a mistake.

This is why people were taken into exile. As part of the punishment for a rebellion that they tried to pull off 605 BC, the Babylonians took several hundred nobles and members of the royal family captive and held them essentially as hostages. A rebellion in 597 BC resulted in tens of thousands of the better educated Judeans together with many of the skilled workers and artisans being taken and resettled in penal colonies in far off Babylon. The thought was to take away the people who were most likely to organize and lead a future rebellion.

These are the people to whom Ezekiel ministered, and to whom he gave the prophecy that is today's text. It's helpful to know that at the time he gives them these words, they've been living in exile for over a decade. Life for them was hard. Their greatest hope is to be set free and to be allowed to return to their homeland. It falls to Ezekiel to tell them that's not going to happen – at least, not yet.

That's bad news for the people in exile. But then comes the most devastating blow. In the chapter that precedes our text, a lone refugee survivor shows up with the crushing news that Judah had rebelled against Babylon yet again. And this time the Babylonians had had enough. They decided to make Judah and its capital Jerusalem an example to other conquered nations of what happens when you try our patience once too many too times. In so doing, they were acting as the Lord's agents to show what happens when his patience is stretched beyond its limit. The destruction was total. Jerusalem was leveled to the ground and plowed like a hayfield. Nothing remained. The other cities of Judah were likewise razed and left in ruins. All the inhabitants of the land were either dead or sold into slavery. For the exiles who had longed to return home, this was the worst news possible. They had no home to return to. Worse, they felt that God himself had abandoned them. They had no home. No God. No hope in the world.

Or so it seemed to them. The Lord's message through Ezekiel is one of hope in what seemed to be a hopeless situation. In the section immediately before today's text, the Lord says how strongly he's opposed to the shepherds of Israel who had long either led the people astray or at very least failed in their duty to properly take care of his sheep. He accuses them of having fleeced the flock entrusted to their care, and of thinking only about how they could take advantage of the sheep for their own selfish gain. It's a sharp condemnation of the political and religious leaders of Judah whose failure to heed God's Word resulted in this disaster falling upon the nation. And we should take note of this: the Lord holds each person individually accountable for his or her own sin; but his judgment falls especially hard on those to whom he has entrusted positions of leadership and authority. They are doubly guilty when they fail to correct, rebuke, guide, and properly train those whom God has placed under them. Their sin encourages and causes others to sin.

But now it's precisely in light of the failure of the shepherds of Israel to do their job that the Lord says, "I myself will search out my sheep ... that have been scattered ... and I will rescue them ... I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land. ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep." In other words, What you broke, I'm going to fix. What you messed up with your selfish greed, your wicked

pursuit of pleasure, your foolish pride, and your weak and ineffective leadership, I'm going to repair and restore. In short, it's the Lord saying that the only way he can get a job done right is for him to do it himself.

And he did. This is where we get the threefold fulfillment of this prophecy. In the first sense, it was fulfilled in the restoration of the nation of Judah. Actually, a better word for it is the *resurrection* of the nation. It was dead. The Lord brought it back to life. Some fifty years after Ezekiel wrote this promise of God, the Lord turned his judgment on the Empire of Babylon. It fell to Persia. And the Lord moved the first king of that empire, a man named Cyrus, to issue a decree that allowed the Judean exiles to return to their own land and to reestablish their nation. He even made provision for helping to pay for their return and for rebuilding the Temple of the Lord. Now, any student of history will tell you that these sorts of things just don't happen. Dead nations usually stay that way. But the Lord made this promise to his people and fulfilled it.

He began to fulfill it again in a greater sense at the time of Christ. Then God himself in the person of the eternal Son took on human flesh and served as the Good Shepherd of his flock. He did so over and against the rotten shepherds of that day who were leading the sheep astray with false teaching and taking advantage of them through their corrupt practices. As the Good Shepherd, he gave his life for the sheep – the atoning sacrifice for their sin. When that happened, it appeared to the faithful that all was lost. They gave up hope, just as they did in the days of Ezekiel. But the Lord fulfilled his Word. The Good Shepherd rose again to lead his own to living water and green pastures. He continues to do so through his Church in which he is even now gathering his lost and scattered sheep through the proclamation of his Gospel. And he is shepherding them in his flock through those he has called and appointed to that duty: pastors, teachers, parents, church officers and others – all of whom he gives authority in his name to lead, guide, and care for those who are his own. And he will hold them accountable for how well they perform the tasks he's assigned them.

Now as in the past, there are plenty of bad shepherds out there who are unfaithful to the Lord and to the vocations to which he's called them. False preachers and teachers distort and obscure the true Gospel. Lazy pastors and teachers don't train, discipline, and feed God's lambs as they should. Unfaithful parents by their neglect of duty or their bad examples lead their children away from the Lord rather than to him. Upon such The Lord promises a greater judgment will fall. They will be held doubly accountable: for their own sins and for the sins into which they led others.

And it's not just the shepherds who will be judged. The Lord promises also to judge between sheep and sheep; between the fat and the lean, between the strong and the weak. This speaks to our treatment of our brothers and sisters in Christ. The fat sheep who push away the leaner are those who are happy to receive the gifts of the Gospel for themselves and yet deprive them to others, judging them to be unworthy. These are the proud, the self-righteous, the unforgiving; they look down on others. Rather than encouraging and looking out for their weaker brothers and sisters and gladly welcoming them, they butt them away with their shoulders and horns. Such as these the Lord promises to destroy.

And he will. We can be sure of it. Why? For two reasons: first because the Lord has spoken. His Word is true and unbreakable. It cannot fail despite what we see or how things appear. But the second reason is because we've already seen two fulfillments of this prophecy. We await the third, final, and greatest fulfillment of all when forever and always the Lord himself will come down to rescue his flock from where it's been scattered all across this globe. On that day the dead will be raised, and all will stand before him to face judgment. He will separate the

sheep from the goats, the weak from the strong, and the good under-shepherds from the bad. The former will be rewarded with life in his everlasting kingdom, the latter condemned to eternal punishment.

So, what I'd have you see is that we live in the era of "Already and not yet". Two fulfillments down, one to go. Knowing this, what kind of people ought we to be? First, we ought to be hopeful. There's plenty to be discouraged about in this world as the love of many grows cold, as evil seems to gain the upper hand, as the morals of our society sink ever lower. These things too have been foreseen and revealed to us by the Lord. He's assured us that one day they will end. No matter how bad it gets, don't lose hope in him.

Second, we ought to remain repentant. Knowing that the Lord will judge between sheep and sheep, and that he promises harsher judgment for those entrusted with authority, we ought to examine ourselves continuously in light of our callings to see and know how our sins and failures are adversely affecting others and making it more difficult for them.

Third, we ought to remain faithful. The Lord is even now shepherding us through the Church in which we hear his voice speaking to us through his Word. This Word is alive and powerful. It feeds our faith in Jesus and keeps it alive. By it we live in Christ even if we die. And so we make it our mission to gladly hear and learn his Word, for its saving truth is life and salvation.

So, there it is: already and not yet. Two down, one to go. And you know what they say: The third time's the charm. Look forward to it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***