

OUR AGE FROM GOD'S POINT OF VIEW

From a scientific and technical point of view our present age is different from preceding ages. That is how we see it. Many of the things we have that our fathers did not have come from developments in electronics and new means of communication. However, "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun", as the writer of Ecclesiastes tells us.

We also have the ability to compare what prophets of God said about people in previous ages by studying what they said and wrote to people long ago. Very little has changed. At the time of the flood, Genesis tells us: "God considered the world as corrupt, and the earth was filled with violence" (Gn 6:11). Jesus has told us that at the time of His return, the days will be like the days of Noah (Mt 24:37). He means the complacency in which people lived then, without an inkling of their impending destruction. Are our days similar with respect to violence? We ought to recognise that the growth of terrorism to an apparently unprecedented extent should make us aware that here too we have a sign of the last times. Previously in wars one army was here and another there, and each knew roughly where the other was. It is impossible to fight a war against terrorism, in spite of what some national leaders suggest. Some particular terrorists, perhaps, but not terrorism in the abstract. As we are witnessing, it is very difficult to apprehend people who melt into the community and lay bombs or shoot at non-combatants in the community. It is difficult to combat people who welcome the prospect of death for themselves when they brazenly take hostages. Is this part of what Jesus meant when He said: "People's hearts will fail them as they fearfully wait for the things that are coming on the world"? He meant more, of course, the end of the world itself: "For the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (L 21:26).

If there were prophets speaking directly for God today, what would they be saying? We can get very clear answers from various parts of God's Word. I suggest an examination of some passages from the time where 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles end. Second Kings was written by a man of God who lived through the events of the kingdom of Judah leading up to the exile to Babylon, a person who was contemporary with Jeremiah. Second Chronicles was written by someone apparently closely connected with the priesthood, and who looked back at what had happened from the perspective of the return from the exile, perhaps from the time of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

One cannot read these chapters without a deep feeling of regret for what might have been. The history of God's people has always been a record of tragedy, and this was no exception. King Zedekiah rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar in 588 BC. In spite of the increasing danger he was in, he would not turn to the LORD. None of the other leaders or the general population would, either. Nevertheless, the LORD in His mercy continued to send warnings through the prophets, as He had been doing all along, but the people despised the Word of the Lord and mocked His prophets. So there was no remedy. We may think of the slightly earlier time when Hezekiah restored the worship of the LORD in Judah, rededicated the temple, and planned a special observance of the Passover. The Northern Kingdom was at its last gasp. Not one of its succession of kings had been God-fearing. Hezekiah sent couriers even through the Northern Kingdom, to encourage the people to return to the LORD and to invite them to come to Jerusalem for that Passover. However, most of them scorned and ridiculed his couriers. Hezekiah had problems nearer home. When he arranged the Passover, even many of the priests in Jerusalem did not bother to consecrate themselves for it (2 Chr 30).

What was God to do but carry out His threats, even in such a way that the worship of Himself at the temple where He had chosen to put His name would cease. He would act against His own chosen people. By this time, the LORD had already caused the people of the Northern Kingdom to be carried off to Assyria, never to return. Surely, that would have been a warning example! Jeremiah wrote: "'For the family of Israel and the family of Judah have been utterly treacherous to me,' declares the Lord. 'They have been speaking falsely of the LORD and have been saying: 'He will not do anything. No disaster will come upon us, and we shall not see sword or famine!'" The LORD also warned through Jeremiah: "Go now to My place, which used to be at Shiloh, where I had made My name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel. Now, therefore, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I shall do to the temple, which is called by My name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I have given to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh. I shall cast you out of My sight, as I cast out all your relatives, all the offspring of Ephraim" (Jr 7:12-15).

At last Nebuchadnezzar's army came to Jerusalem at God's prompting, and delivered a smashing blow that brought Judah's independence to an end. Young and old alike were killed and many of the others taken as prisoners. The valuable treasures of the temple were looted and the building itself burned and reduced to rubble, along with the palaces. The city's wall was also broken down. Those who escaped death were taken to Babylon where they existed as slaves until Babylon fell to Persia in 539 BC.

The writer of 2 Chronicles gives the reasons for this. "The LORD, the God of their fathers, had been sending Word to them again and again through His messengers, because He took pity on His people and on His dwelling place. However, they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising His Words and scoffing at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against His people, until there was no remedy" (36:15-16). The people had been neglecting the Lord's Sabbaths, so He sent them into exile for seventy years so that His land might enjoy its Sabbath rests. "This happened to fulfil the Word of the LORD spoken through Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the time during which it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfil seventy years" (2 Ch 36:21).

We can be sure that, when the Lord looks at our society, with its blatant disregard for the sanctity of marriage, measured by the statistics for divorce (half as many as weddings), and by many “current partners” who do not even bother about commitment in marriage, toleration of gay rights, disregard for the sanctity of human life in abortion, the increasing contempt for God’s commandments, the scandals within the church itself in the abuse of children, with what that says about hypocrisy among church-leaders, and still worse, the failure of many churches to abide by God’s Word in its truth and purity, the services arranged by the state as a form of state religion, in which the true God is put on the same level as gods of false faiths, surely it is right to speak also about the Lord’s fiercely hot anger, as at that time: “Nevertheless, the LORD did not turn away His fiercely hot anger, which had broken out against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done to provoke Him to anger. So the LORD said, ‘I shall remove Judah also from My presence, as I have removed Israel, and I shall reject this city, Jerusalem, which I have chosen, and the temple about which I had promised, “My name will be there.”’” (2 K 23:26-27).

As we see wickedness abound in our own nation, what are we Christians to do? Jeremiah, Ezra, and Daniel confessed their sin to God, and confessed the sin of their own nation, and pleaded with God for mercy. In our current situation, where we have many reminders of God’s just and fierce anger, that is what we must also do.

When the exiles returned, the leader, Zerubbabel, was bearing the promised Messianic seed (Mt 1:13). Just as 2 Chronicles was written from the perspective of the joy of the return from exile of some of God’s people at least, His remnant, so too our Lord Jesus has promised that the gates of Hades will not prevail against His church (Mt 16:18). Those who remain faithful to the Lord have the certain hope of life eternal. There He will be their God, and they will be His people, and apostasy and open wickedness will be no more.