Judgment and New Beginning

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First Sunday of Advent
Sunday Readings for December 2, 2012 for Cycle C:
Jer 33:14-16; Ps 25; 1 Thes 3:12-4:2; Lk 21:25-28 and 34-36

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Like every aspect of our lives, we begin the new liturgical year with an awareness that we stand before God in judgment. As our Creator and as Lord of time and history, God has expectations of his creatures. Yet, as a loving Father showing mercy and patience toward wayward children, God offers his people every opportunity to acknowledge past sins and to receive forgiveness and hope. Advent is a special season of penance oriented toward the joy of Christ's coming.

The prophet Jeremiah offered this carefully balanced understanding of God to the people of Judah as their leaders careened toward disaster during the time when Nebuchadnezzar, the Emperor of Babylon, threatened Judah and Jerusalem. Already he had taken their King Jeconiah into exile and set up his uncle Mattaniah ("gift of God") in his stead. To show that Mattaniah was a mere puppet, Nebuchadnezzar changed his name to Zedekiah. This name means "The LORD is my righteousness (justice)". Jeremiah could see that this man made a mockery of the solemn responsibilities of a king in the Davidic dynasty. He criticized the king and his nobles as uncaring shepherds and promised that God would raise up a righteous (just) shoot from the Davidic dynasty. His name would be "The LORD is our righteousness" (23:1-6). Of course the king recognized that the very name was a rebuke against him so he eventually imprisoned the prophet.

The passage proclaimed from Jeremiah 33 is part of a summary of the prophet's earlier message. The promise of a righteous descendant of King David is now preceded by hope for the restoration of all twelve tribes (see Jer 31:31). After all, David united them all in God's service after he had captured Jerusalem and made it the capital of Israel. At times the family tree of Jesse (David's father) seemed to be a mere dead stump, but the prophets of Judah kept the hope alive: God would fulfill his promise to David through Nathan (see 2 Sam 7:8-16). He will accomplish what is just and righteous throughout the land inhabited by the twelve tribes. More than a century earlier, during another time of trial, Isaiah had proclaimed: "A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse..." Upon him would be bestowed the fullness of the Spirit's gifts. As a result "he would judge the poor with righteousness and decide aright for the afflicted of the land" (11:1-4). Like Isaiah, Jeremiah believed that perfect leadership would bring universal peace. "In those days Judah will be safe and Jerusalem shall dwell secure; this is what they shall call her: 'The LORD is our righteousness'" (Jer 33:16).

The reader will note that a title previously applied to the Anointed One (Messiah) is now bestowed on Jerusalem, personification of the chosen people. The task of the Messiah as teacher is to bring all to the highest response to God's will, imitating the divine righteousness or integrity.
The Gospel tradition always portrays Jesus to be the awaited Son of David, the Teacher who guides his followers into profound peace with God the Father and each other. As Jesus came to Jerusalem he stressed that he is also God's chosen instrument for judging the world. "People will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud with great power and glory” (Lk 21:27). This passage alludes to the judgment scene in the heavenly court when a mysterious human being enters the divine presence and receives royal power over all the nations (Dn 7:10-14).

The thought of judgment for our every thought, word, deed and omission is not easy to entertain. If the Church were not to challenge us, we would tend to be caught up with the manifold pressures and pleasures of daily life. With the words of Jesus, the Church exhorts us to vigilance. "Pray constantly for the strength to escape all that will take place and to stand secure before the Son of Man” (Lk 21:36). We should include in this prayer a petition for the right order in our lives that will be a component of life in union with God.