The Twenty-Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Rolling Meadows - 1978

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IN NOMINE JESU

I THESSALONIANS 3: 7-13

Nov. 19
Today is the anniversary of the birthday of BILLY SUNDAY -- you remember, that "hell-fir and brimstone" evangelist who at the turn of the Century tried to "shut down" Chicago because of its vice, and crime, and corruption. It is said that he gained many converts by his repeated and relentless emphasis on IMPENDING JUDGMENT and the IMMINENT RETURN OF CHRIST to establish His Kingdom and banish evil doers to the flaming fires of hell and eternal torment..... Well, I am not at all sure just how effective BILLY SUNDAY'S SERMONS were -- using SCARE TACTICS, as he did, to bring about REPENTANCE and put the FEAR OF GOD into otherwise irreligious people. But I do know this -- and it is as sure as "death and taxes" -- the DAY OF RECKONING AND JUDGMENT will come. It may be SOON or LATE -- but IT WILL COME. It WILL COME for each of us.

That is the point of the Lessons for today. The Word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah and says: "STAND IN THE COURT OF THE LORD'S HOUSE, AND SPEAK TO ALL THE CITIES OF JUDAH WHICH COME TO WORSHIP IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD ALL THE WORDS THAT I COMMAND YOU TO SPEAK TO THEM; DO NOT HOLD BACK A WORD. IT MAY BE THEY WILL LISTEN, AND EVERY ONE TURN FROM HIS EVIL WAY, THAT I MAY REPENT OF THE EVIL WHICH I INTEND TO DO TO THEM BECAUSE OF THEIR EVIL DOINGS." And in today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus tells His disciples about the impending destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem: "TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, THERE WILL NOT BE LEFT HERE ONE STONE UPON ANOTHER, THAT WILL NOT BE THROWN DOWN." And then Jesus goes on

to describe what lies in store for them: "THEY WILL DELIVER YOU UP TO TRIBULATION, AND PUT YOU TO DEATH; AND YOU WILL BE HATED BY ALL NATIONS FOR MY NAME'S SAKE. AND THEN MANY WILL FALL AWAY, AND BETRAY ONE ANOTHER, AND HATE ONE ANOTHER.....AND BECAUSE WICKEDNESS IS MULTIPLIED, MOST MEN'S LOVE WILL GROW COLD."

In our text St. Paul is very anxious that this does not happen to the Christians at Thessalonica. With a truly pastoral heart he hopes to be able to visit them soon and "SEE them FACE TO FACE" and, as he says, "SUPPLY WHAT IS LACKING IN their FAITH." And then the apostle offers this prayer: "MAY THE LORD MAKE YOU INCREASE AND ABOUND IN LOVE TO ONE ANOTHER AND TO ALL MEN, AS WE DO TO YOU, SO THAT HE MAY ESTABLISH YOUR HEARTS UNBLAMABLE IN HOLINESS BEFORE OUR GOD AND FATHER, AT THE COMING OF OUR LORD JESUS WITH ALL HIS SAINTS."

You see, the FINAL JUDGMENT is really nothing to be afraid of -- at least not for those who have "ESTABLISHed their HEARTS UNBLAMABLE IN HOLINESS BEFORE their GOD AND FATHER." And just think of the BLESSED REUNION with our loved ones, our dear dead, "AT THE COMING OF OUR LORD JESUS WITH ALL HIS SAINTS."

Who are these "SAINTS" -- these whose hearts are "UNBLAMABLE IN HOLINESS BEFORE their GOD AND FATHER?" You know the answer as well as I do. It is not really by any "WORKS"

which we have done. "BY HIS MERCY HE SAVED US." -- "BY THE WASHING OF REGENERATION AND RENEWING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT." Who are these "SAINTS" coming with Christ at the Last Judgment? St. John tells us: "THESE ARE THEY WHO HAVE COME OUT OF THE GREAT TRIBULATION THEY HAVE WASHED THEIR ROBES AND MADE THEM WHITE IN THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB."

I want to make a point here!

~~Could I try to make a final point here?~~ It is based on some other words from the great apostle Paul: "FOR ME TO LIVE IS CHRIST; TO DIE IS GAIN." Now I know that DEATH and JUDGMENT point their ugly fingers at everything in our lives -- our experiences, our convictions, our faith. But WHEN -- GOD HELP US -- WHEN will we honestly face the REALITY of DEATH and JUDGMENT? ..... We use the words "in memory of" those who have died rather than face the real reality. We don't even like to use the word, "dead, or died." Rather, we use euphemisms like "passing away" or "falling asleep." Funeral homes have become COSMETIC PARLORS in a futile attempt to DISGUISE the ugly reality of death. Some people say that DEATH has NO REALITY at all --- it is ONLY AN ILLUSION. And our infatuation with the IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL -- as if there were something in me that is eternally indestructible -- helps us to refuse to face the FACT OF LIFE which is DEATH.

Now that I have started, let me press the point even farther. I have always been leery of EULOGIES at funerals -- so often a hunting ground for SOMETHING GOOD TO SAY about a person who has died that sometimes the person remembered is NO LONGER RECOGNIZABLE by

those who knew him or her best. EULOGIES suggest that we must find some good in a person -- or that person is not worth remembering. So it is that we say, "Speak only good of the dead." ..... Well, I would like to know whatever happened to the honest theology in the hymn: "Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me." Whatever happened to the truly great passages of Scripture like: "WHILE WE WERE YET SINNERS, CHRIST DIED FOR US." "WRETCHED MAN THAT I AM! WHO WILL DELIVER ME FROM THIS BODY OF DEATH? THANKS BE TO GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD." "O DEATH, WHERE IS THY STING? O GRAVE, WHERE IS THY VICTORY?.... THANKS BE TO GOD WHO GIVETH US THE VICTORY THROUGH OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST."

That is what it means to be a "SAINT." "Saints" are FORGIVEN ONES. They are "WASHED IN THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB." And they will RETURN WITH CHRIST on the Last Day..... The point is that God does not just "speak good of the dead" -- He remembers all! And it is instructive to recall that at the resurrection, the first reaction in every one of the resurrection narratives was NOT UNQUALIFIED JOY or RELIEF -- but it was FEAR AND AWE. The reason? Because now <u>ALL</u> was ALIVE again -- the betrayals, the denials, the desertion under pressure --- <u>ALL</u> was remembered and brought back to life again. No wonder the Gospels record the first reaction: "AND THEY WERE AFRAID!" For who could possibly want EVERYTHING -- EVERYTHING -- brought to LIFE AGAIN -- REMEMBERED?

But that is precisely the WONDER of GOD'S GRACE -- and HIS REMEMBERING. "HE REMEMBERS OUR SINS NO MORE." "AS FAR AS THE EAST IS FROM THE WEST, SO FAR HAS HE REMOVED OUR TRANSGRESSIONS FROM US." His GRACE enfolds the WHOLE PERSON -- He takes the BAD along with the GOOD. We don't have to try to PRETEND..... But while we are waiting for that GREAT DAY -- when Christ will COME AGAIN with the "SAINTS" -- it is for us, as the apostle says to "INCREASE AND ABOUND IN LOVE TO LONE ANOTHER AND TO ALL MEN." Amen.