

Ruth 3: 1-5; 4: 13-17  
Psalm 127  
Hebrews 9: 24-28  
St. Mark 12: 38-44

Pentecost 25 2024.

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“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who built it labour in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.” Psalm 127: 1

Many works of art can be appreciated in several different ways at one time... For example, let’s look at the large front window at St. Brice’s (often called the “east” window, because the front of the church buildings used to be built facing east, toward the rising sun)... This stained-glass window is a depiction of the well-known story of the risen Jesus appearing to 2 disciples travelling to Emmaus, and sharing a meal with them...

Now, for some people, they admire the window like this because of the beauty of the coloured glass, and the light shining through... That’s *one* way to appreciate this work of art... Others may appreciate that it’s a promise of the presence of the risen Lord Jesus among us, often in surprising ways... That is a second way to appreciate this work of art... A third group of people might appreciate that the text is quoting from the Bible... Indeed, stained glass windows were often used in the past to teach Bible stories, when many people could not read or write. That is a third way to appreciate this window... Yet others might appreciate how the east window fits architecturally within the building... This window is set over the communion table, the altar, where we celebrate and share in the presence of Christ as we share communion together... For the fourth group, having this window art near the altar can be a reminder to us of the presence of Christ, as we share in the family meal together... None of these perspectives is *wrong*... They are all different ways of appreciating the same artistic work...

We can say the same about many Bible passages... One person may carry an insight; a second person might have a different interpretation. It doesn’t mean that one of them has to be wrong! They both might have insights into the gospel message...

Today’s psalm is “Psalm 127.” It begins, “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who built it labour in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain...” Once again: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who built it labour in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain...”

Now, some people take this to be a psalm about family life – “unless the Lord builds the house...” and the psalmist goes on to proclaim (verse 3) “Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward...”

Other commentators say, though, “The place to worship God – the temple – is sometimes called “the *house* of God...” “Unless the Lord builds the house” is really about *God* – blessing the temple building to his honour...

Yet others say: Isn't this psalm really about God's care for his people – politically (“the city”), or in our daily lives?... A third interpretation is about God's care for us...

So, here are 3 complementary interpretations of Psalm 127: 1. It's about family life. 2. It's about the place of worship. 3. It's about God's care for us...

I don't want to take a particular position or interpretation. My hope is that we can be generous enough to hear other people's interpretations, and appreciate them, as well as our own... (I am always pleased whenever we are reading the good news contained in the Bible – the easy parts; and the not-so-easy parts...)

Let's unpack some of the teaching in Psalm 127... We all have our individual ups and downs, in our homes; or in our families... Yet, sometimes, the community as a whole, even our political systems, are affected by wide events... For example, a few years ago, the COVID pandemic affected us all, throughout the world...

This Sunday, I'm aware that some parishioners have watched the recent American elections with interest – among us, there are some who are likely relieved; and there are some of us who likely carry anxiety... How might this psalm speak into our lives today?...

How is God at work in God's world?... What is *our* role – our role as people? (For we are not puppets; that's bad theology. Christians believe firmly that we have free will, and agency to conduct our lives...)

Is it correct to say that every political leader is doing God's will (this is the view some Christians take, based on Romans 13: 1)?... Or, should we take the position that political forces and leaders can never do God's will (a position which other Christians have taken, based on II Corinthians 6: 17)?... Or, might we take a more balanced or nuanced view – and, is this consistent with the gospel?...

Before we talk about how God and politicians work or don't work together, let's talk about how *God* and people in general *work* – or don't work – together!...

Above all, the story of the Bible is that God reigns and is triumphant (not “triumphal-ism” – but God is over all, and Lord and Master of all)... God's will is always fulfilled. It's best we never to lose sight of this. Otherwise, we can get in the silly position that we think that we need to grab the steering wheel from God... God's will always triumphs in the end...

This means that we all probably need to relax a little... If we follow politics closely and don't like a current candidate – well, one day, perhaps soon, there will be no candidate at all... On the other hand, if we really like one or another political leader, it's good to keep in mind that kingdoms rise, and kingdoms fall...

If we are arrogant or proud of our position, that is when we are most likely to fall!... God doesn't want anxious or proud disciples – God wants humble, faithful followers.... God always triumphs. We – Canadians as a whole -- might be called to step back; to slow down; to see the big picture...

We recall that God is the Provider... We are not to eat “the bread of anxious toil; for [God] gives sleep to his beloved...” (God’s provision is not only bread, but God can meet all our needs... “Give us this day our daily bread,” we pray. We’re asking God to meet *all* our needs...) God can provide for our needs. God’s will shall triumph. No election outcome will ever be a surprise to God... If we are inclined to pride or anxiety, then we likely need to step back, and slow down, at least for a moment...

A second theological fact for us to keep in mind is the reality of human sin and disobedience, everywhere... In the Old Testament, we read that the nation of Israel was blessed by some wonderful leaders – Moses; David; Joshua; and so on... But we can also read that Israel and Judah had some pretty miserable leaders as well – Ahab; Jezebel; Absalom; and many others... People in leadership, whether in the clergy or in political life, can be enticed to sin; self-centredness; or the idol of power...

We note that when God’s people were leading lives as God would have them live, they usually got good leaders... When the people were disobedient, they ended up selecting some miserable or flawed leaders!...

The prophet Joel links misery in the land with the leadership of the time:

The priests mourn, the ministers of the Lord.  
The fields are devastated, the ground mourns;  
    for the grain is destroyed,  
    the wine dries up,  
    the oil fails.  
Be dismayed, you farmers, wail, you vine-dressers,  
    over the wheat and the barley;  
    for the crops of the field are ruined.

The people need to seek the Lord, Joel prophesies, and God will restore the land:

Sanctify a fast,  
    call a solemn assembly.  
Gather the elders  
    and all the inhabitants of the land  
to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord.

Yet even now, says the Lord,  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;  
rend your hearts and not your clothing.  
Return to the Lord, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing. (Joel 1: 9-11, 15; 2: 12-13)

The first theological fact before us is the reign or rule of God over all creation... The second theological fact is human disobedience, restored when we are in right relationships with God and with one another...

Election days come and go... We often need to raise our eyes higher, to God's great cosmic triumph – to the reality of God's reign through Jesus Christ, and God restoring us to himself, perfectly accomplished through Jesus Christ by his Spirit...

What can we do, practically speaking, as Christians, whoever is in political leadership in any country?... I believe all Christians are called to two general responses, whether the politicians of the day are to the right or to the left:

First, we all called to make a respectful contribution to the wider communities in which we live. We are called to work together with God to bring about God's priorities, his kingdom... Of course we want all people to respond to the gift of Jesus Christ, but God's mission is even bigger than that! God the Holy Spirit is already at work in the world. We learn to cooperate with God in advancing God's priorities, and resisting what is harmful and disobedient... Where there is human need, the Church should be seen to be at the forefront to alleviate suffering... We are called to speak out and to act, respectfully, firmly, and humbly, for what we believe to be God's best... Here are just 2 examples from the Bible:

Pay to all what is due to them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due. Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13: 7-8)

Then the righteous will answer [Jesus Christ, the Son of Man], “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

(Matthew 25: 37-40)

What is a faithful response to whatever political or social conditions we find ourselves in?... First, we are called to make a positive difference in the world around us. Second, we are called to pray. Pray – including, praying for God’s best for those who are in positions of political authority. First Timothy 2 begins,

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

I am absolutely convinced that the humble, consistent prayers of the saints have a positive impact on the world around us...

Psalms 127 can be seen to speak about family life and community life; and, about God’s relationship with his people... We cannot deny that what politicians do impact our lives. Theologically, we recall God’s sovereignty and the reality of human sin among us all, from which we are restored perfectly in Jesus Christ... What are we called to do in the world around us?... We are called to be salt and light in a hurting world; and we are called to pray.

May God be glorified in all our lives; now and for ever...

Amen.