

If you had to name the most Christian places in the world, where would you pick? You'd probably say here in the United States, because most of us are in fact Christian. You might even say parts of Europe, for that matter, because at least historically, they were one of the most Christian places in the world. But would you include in that list a place like North Africa? Egypt and modern Libya? Because they were once the home of many, many Christians long ago, and some of the greatest teachers that we have in the Christian church came from that part of the world. Men like Augustine, men like Cyril, men like Cyprian, men who continue to teach the church about Jesus Christ through their writings. But northern Africa today is not Christian. It is full of Muslims. And the few Christians that are there, unfortunately, are persecuted for their faith very severely. So what changed? What made the difference? How do they get from where they were to where they are now? All the difference comes, Christians, because the time of God's visitation came to an end.

Would you also include in your list a place like modern Turkey, which used to be one of the most Christian empires in all the world? The Byzantine Empire, which held back the forces of Islam and non-Christian forces from the Christian west for centuries. But look at it today. It is full of Muslims. You've probably even heard in the news recently of the great Hagia Sophia, the church in Istanbul. One of the most important Christian churches in the world is being reconverted into a mosque to serve the Muslims in Istanbul, which was once the great Christian city of Constantinople. So what changed? What made the difference? The time of God's visitation had come to an end.

Because the thing that we learn from our reading today, Christians, in the Gospel, is that God's time of visitation, the time of God's mercy, the time of God's being patient with us and giving us more time, does not go on forever. There will come a time when God's visitation comes to an end, and then the time of grace will have passed us by. Whether at the very end of days when he comes again to judge the world, or in our lives, when our lives come to an end, and we have no longer an opportunity to repent. So we are called then to pay attention, to watch, to know the time of God's visitation. Because if we don't, unfortunately, it will quickly pass us by.

We see that in our reading for today with the Jews, because the Jews did not receive Jesus as the Lord. They turned away from him. They didn't want to believe in him. They didn't want to trust in him. They didn't want to be saved by grace. They wanted to be saved by their works. And because they wanted to be saved by their works, they crucified the Lord of glory, and the time of their visitation too came to an end.

Because you can see the situation that this text presents to us. We're here on Palm Sunday, of all Sundays. Jesus is riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, coming into his own, because he is the son of David, because he is the one who is claiming that throne. And the whole city is stirred up because of it. You can just see them. Children singing, people crying out, "Hosanna to the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" The whole city is excited that Jesus is here. But Jesus riding on his donkey is crying, crying over the city, crying over them because they did not know the things that make for peace. They did not know their Savior. They would turn away from him, and not a few days later, on Good Friday, cry for his blood. And so Jesus says, because you did not know the time of your visitation, the days are coming when your enemies will surround you. They will set up a barricade around you and hem you in on every

side. And then they will tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you, and not leave one stone upon another, because you did not pay attention when God had come near. And we see that happen in history, because the Romans came, not forty years later. And they tore down Jerusalem, because they surrounded it. They hemmed it in on every side, and they left not one stone upon another, destroying the city, destroying the walls, destroying the temple, because the Jews had rejected the Lord. The time of grace had come to an end. The time of judgment had come upon them.

Are we paying attention then, Christians, when God comes among us today? Because for God to visit us can either be in terms of his mercy or in terms of his judgment. The Bible speaks in both ways. But here Jesus is talking about visiting us, coming near to us in mercy, coming near to us with the offer of salvation, coming to us and saying, "Turn away from your sins and be saved!" But if we're not paying attention, if we don't know the time of our visitation, God's mercy doesn't go on forever.

Because what does it mean for us to not know? It means to hold on to our sins, to hold onto those things which are contrary to the will of God and to not want to let them go, to think that we can be saved by the things that we do, and God will take care of it no matter what. Or it can also mean we just aren't paying attention, that we think that we always have more time, that there always be tomorrow to get to the things of God. There will always be church next week that we can go to and then we can deal with the things of God then. We have other things we need to take care of. But do you know, Christians, that you will have next week? Do you even know if you have tomorrow? We don't, unfortunately. God's mercy does not go on forever. The time will come to an end, and then the judgment will come.

So what then does it mean to know the time of our visitation, to be paying attention? It means to listen today when God calls to you, today when he says to you, "Your sins are forgiven," today when he says that the time of his grace is at hand. Because salvation is not something that is always far off, Christians, always something that we can just put off until later. Salvation is now. God's mercy is now. Now is the favorable time! Now is the day of salvation! God comes to you in his word now! He gives you his Son's body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins now. He calls for you to turn away from the sins of darkness now. To cling to him now, and to hold onto him now, because now is the favorable time! Now is the time that he comes to you and offers you his grace.

So what should we do then, as the jailer asked Paul in Acts. What should I do? Repent. Repent and believe the gospel. Believe in him who has given himself for you. Trust in him and hold onto him, because his salvation is for you today. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, we don't know, but what we do know is that right now God says to you, "Come. Take my gifts and receive my forgiveness. Turn away from your sins, repent, and believe." And when we do that Christians, when we hold onto God in true faith today, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

So today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Today if you hear his voice, do not turn away from him. Today if you hear his voice, repent and believe the Gospel. And you will be saved. Now is the favorable time! Now is the day of salvation! God comes to you now. And he

forgives you now, so that you may believe and hold onto him for eternal life now. Hold onto him, Christians. Believe in him and come to him, turning away from your sins today, because God is merciful and he desires to save you today.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.