

## Sermon Ordinary Sunday 32 Year A 2017

The parable we encounter today highlights an important concern of the New Testament writers: the expectation that the Lord Christ would return soon. But then, in the light of his apparent delay, a rethinking about the church's life, its role and identity as it settled into the long haul. The parable Matthew places before us today speaks directly to this situation. The old fashioned moralistic reading of this parable saw it as a lesson in prudence – a boy scout kind of 'always be prepared.' But more helpfully, I think, better read as a warning against being caught unawares; that in the life of faith we not become casual and complacent, for we know not the day or the hour.

The context the church now finds itself in the West requires of us – all who profess faith in Jesus Christ – a particular vigilance, an especial watchfulness. Many people are understandably alarmed by the decline of institutional life in the West. But they would not be so surprised if they understood how much of our shared life and our intellectual heritage depends on Christian faith shared by its people. The abandonment of faith (and with no convincing moral or ethical framework to replace it) has inevitably seen the disintegration of our civic and intellectual life. The institutions that have been the foundation of our civilization could only endure as long as a solid mass of the people live by the general cultural code that the Christian religion once provided. The Enlightenment project went reasonably well as long as Enlightenment democracies remembered and tended their Christian roots. But we have not done that for a long time. The general collapse of Christianity in the West will inevitably mean the collapse of structures built on Christian thought and practice.

In this context, traditional and orthodox Christians are at extreme risk for losing their faith in this post-Christian - and increasingly anti-Christian - culture, and that those who hold on to their faith are going to face great difficulties, even persecution. Christians who are not thinking hard about these coming trials, and working *now* to prepare for them, are foolish. The aggressive secularization of mainstream society has implications for the church. But a renewed church will see society safely through the dark times ahead, so Christians must begin renewing the church *now*. But this will cost individual Christians. Christians need to reconsider the role of work in their lives, not just because it has taken on an outsized role in modern life, but because Christians are not going to be left alone by the progressives that dominate our economy.

An American writer, Rob Dreher who has written extensively on this line, has said, "*We may not (yet) be at the point where Christians are forbidden to buy and sell in general without state approval, but we are on the brink of entire areas of commercial and professional life being off-limits to believers whose consciences will not allow them to burn incense to the gods of our age.*" It's easy to think of recent examples pulled from the headlines from other jurisdictions - Christian bakers, florists, and wedding planners who decline to participate in same-sex weddings, foster parents who refuse to affirm the ideology of transgenderism at the behest of state agencies, employers who won't provide contraceptives to their employees. The list of mandates, large and small, will surely grow longer as our governments persist in their progressive agenda.

It may well be that Christians will have to reconcile themselves to a kind of second-class status that we have never really known. That means, to put it bluntly, preparing

for relative deprivation and hardship. As anyone with lamps lit - watching and waiting - knows, the long peace that has persisted in the West between church and state is at an end. This will come as a shock to Christians who assumed their cultural dominance was permanent. Archbishop of Philadelphia Charles Chaput speaks about three different kinds of mourning that are unique to Christians: grief for our own sins, the grief we feel living in a world full of sorrows and suffering, and a third kind, which is measured in the cost of discipleship:

*the sorrow of those who accept the cross of Jesus Christ in this life, die to the world, and prefer the joys of God to worldly offerings. This kind of mourning comes from those who hurt because of their commitment to Jesus. Being disciples makes their lives harder. Maybe it's enduring ridicule from doctors because they're not on the birth control pill and they've had a fourth kid. Maybe their tithing means they can't take a vacation they hoped for. Or maybe it's taking a pay cut because working more would take them away from their family.*

Or maybe it's something even worse. Maybe it's losing your job. Maybe it's having your business seized by the state. Maybe it's going to prison because you refuse to obey laws that violate your Christian faith. Such things have happened before. What makes us think they will not happen again, here?

Pope Benedict XVI was right when he said: it is time now to reconcile ourselves to a smaller, more faithful Church. For serious Christians (and before too long that will be the only kind of Christian – the serious ones!) that will mean integrating their faith so thoroughly into their lives that they risk being labelled a “zealot” or a “fundamentalist” by friends and colleagues, and perhaps labelled something worse by the government. It will mean becoming rather strange in the eyes of the world. Benedict said as much in a radio address nearly 50 years ago, when he warned that the Church “will lose many of her social privileges” and “make much bigger demands” on believers. But he closed with these words of hope: *The real crisis has scarcely begun. We will have to count on terrific upheavals. But I am equally certain about what will remain at the end: not the Church of the political cult, which is dead already, but the Church of faith. It may well no longer be the dominant social power to the extent that she was until recently; but she will enjoy a fresh blossoming and be seen as man's home, where he will find life and hope beyond death.*”

The hardship to come is more than a necessity, it is a blessing: the waiting through the long night ahead will be rewarded by the bridegroom himself. And it is what will make a church – such as ours – even more precious and more important. The signs of the times are clear. It's not that it's unimportant to keep working to shore up the city of man. But in the long run it's probably futile. Instead, we had better be working even harder on building authentic Christian communities – oases of beauty, goodness and truth - to endure the chaos that is coming as the Empire disintegrates. Not to retreat into isolationism. But to nurture a gift that ultimately all will benefit from.

The parable today importantly reminds us we carry a light. We can't be just sitting back waiting for things to happen. While the story unfolding around us at many levels is one of loss and disintegration, the parable today reminds us there is another story to come! We need to trust that if the gospel was good for ages past, then it must be good for all ages! If it brings healing, truth and light for me, then it must also for

others. Loss and failure *are* part of our lives. It is part of the life of the church. This shouldn't surprise us. We follow Christ crucified whose own loss and failure is at the centre of faith. But this must always, of course, be put into the perspective of resurrection faith, and in the faith of Christ's ultimate victory over all things. We serve Christ crucified, yes. But also the Glorified One, the bridegroom who is to come and who has entrusted us to light his way. Amen.