

### **Sermon Trinity XXIV/Ordinary Sunday 33 Year A 2023**

The gospel reading placed before us today takes us to Chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel. Chapter 25 is crammed with three significant parables. Last week we heard the parable of the ten virgins, today the parable of the talents. Next week, we hear the account of the sheep and goats, a most suitable reading for the feast of Christ the King as we conclude our liturgical year. But in chapter 24 we hear something, (overlooked by the lectionary selection), but something which surely speaks to us – which surely resonates – with our context, and which sets the tone for the parables we hear over these weeks. It reads: *You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.*

*Wars and rumours of wars.* We are once more living through one of those periodic moments of international unrest. Without fail, when violence arises that impacts the global scene, faithful Christians will say – even to me – ‘Is this it? Is this what our Lord is pointing us to? Are we now in the end times?’ Now, both chapters 24 and 25 show a particular concern of what we might call the ‘last things.’ The related themes of waiting and expectation and preparedness are explored more fully in the Advent season just around the corner.

To all this, we also add the epistle reading, the last couple of weeks taken from the First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians. Again, these selected portions speak directly to the idea of the last things and the return of Christ. By extension, even as these readings direct us ahead, they are concerned with what faithful believers should be doing in the meantime. In other words, the scriptural record does not simply present the return of Christ as an article of faith. The readings also show us that the time of waiting for believers looks like something.

Like last week's reading from Thessalonians, today's epistle portion addresses one of the key questions that hangs upon the prospect of the last things. Last week the epistle reading considered *the fate* of those who had died before Christ comes. The reading today considers *when* Christ would come. Paul here notes the very natural speculation about ‘times and seasons’ that would signal Christ's return. It is the same speculation reflected in Matthew 24 and the concern of wars and rumours of wars.

Paul addresses the issue by firstly reminding his readers of *the futility* of constructing timetables around the Lord's return. Much more important than speculating when he would come, Paul says, is to know *how* it would come: *suddenly and unexpectedly*. Paul's point here of course echoes what we heard last week of the bridegroom who comes at midnight, leaving the five foolish virgins caught unawares. The account ending, *stay awake for you know not either the day nor the hour*. A similar idea is in today's gospel, of the master of the servants who returns '*after a long time*' to settle accounts. In the epistle reading today, Paul uses the image of a thief coming in the night. It is an image used frequently in scripture - the gospels and elsewhere - to illustrate the unpredictability of the Day of the Lord.

Another favourite image used to describe the sudden coming of the Lord is of the woman expecting a child. In today's reading, the image points to the suddenness with which a woman can go into labor and a child be born. The point being that at the critical moment the process is irreversible! As Paul says, *there will be no escape!* Both these images - the stealthy thief, the pregnant woman - serve as vivid reminders that we cannot pinpoint precisely the moment the crisis comes.

Paul here is in complete agreement with the broader witness of the New Testament: the unpredictability of the Lord's coming. But even if the Lord's return is *unpredictable*, it is *not uncertain*. God has been faithful in all his promises. We can be sure he will be faithful in this as well. Because in Christ we see God is trustworthy and true. We know Christ to be the reliable witness for the things of God.

So unpredictable, but not uncertain. Which leads Paul to argue for - again in agreement with the wider New Testament witness - the need for preparedness. Not that this requires us to be something we are not. Or to do something we would not normally do. The point about the state of Christian preparedness for the end is that this is supposed to be our natural environment. In other words, our preparedness is not something strange or alien to us, but something natural and familiar. Paul uses another noteworthy image to convey this: *you are all sons of the light and sons of the day; we are not of night or of darkness*. It is such a powerful, near-universal motif. The totality of Christian life in some ways can be described as the journey - the transition (indeed, conversion) - from darkness to light. And we should be able to say of ourselves: *I am a son or daughter of the light! I am a child of the day!* Forget what the world around us tells us about 'identity'! Here is an identity we can truly claim!

The point of this reassuring knowledge is that ‘children of light’ need not be frightened by enemies of darkness. The threat is real, however. Paul puts it bluntly in Ephesians: *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.* We do ourselves no favours – none at all! – if we imagine the troubles of this world, even the troubles within us and about us – are merely the result of misguided human passions, or human greed or politics or whatever.

As Christians, we confess a spiritual dimension to this world. We cannot settle for a purely materialistic reading of what happens about us. Somewhat remarkably, I have heard one political commentator describe the brutal, murderous and hateful acts enacted by Hamas on October 7 as ‘demonic’. So vile were the acts committed that day, they could only be understood – by this commentator at least – by reaching for another register in our language: the language of spiritual warfare.

It is now abundantly clear that *there are* some very dark forces about us. And much closer to home than perhaps we previously dared to admit. The dark clouds of violence that hang over several parts of the globe may well unsettle us even more. And our response – naturally enough – may well be to retreat in anxiety and fear. In the face of this, then, Paul's words ought to resonate with us: *you are all sons of the light and sons of the day; we are not of night or of darkness.*

The gospel today also speaks to this situation. The essential point (and the most usual interpretation) of the gospel parable is that gifts unused atrophy while gifts exercised increase. But this is to miss *the high-risk activity* of the two faithful servants. They took what was given and doubled their money. But this would not have been possible without running the risk of losing at least the initial outlay! *Christian life, Christian faith cannot be lived without risk.* The third servant acted in exactly the opposite way! He didn't act in faith (and certainly with no risk). He acted in fear. He was immobilized by fear. Fear of failure. Fear of punishment. Fear of loss. It not only paralyzed *this* servant, but many servants and many congregations...

Today we observe our AGM. You would have all - hopefully - had a chance to read the fulsome set of reports. We celebrate the good of the past year. We look forward to the year ahead. But there are some real challenges. A certain response to those challenges may well be fear. To retreat into self-protection. To count our pennies. To not dare try anything new. But we can only proceed in Christian life – personally and communally - with an element of risk. Fear narrows our vision. But we can dare to be bold and optimistic and hopeful precisely because we are children of the light and of the day.

Faith in Christ's return means we are to *remain* alert and ready. It means that whatever - *whatever!!* – is happening about us, as children of the light, as sons and daughter of the day, we are not paralysed by fear. It means we can always look forward in hope, and not fixated on 'times and seasons'. The important question for us is not *when* but *how* the Lord will come. The proper response is neither frenzy nor fear. The proper response is preparedness. Preparedness that comes from knowing that we are 'children of the day.' Amen.