

## Watching and Waiting

The readings for these next few weeks between All Saints Sunday and Christ the King Sunday deal with the end of times and the Second Coming of Jesus. There is a definite change in tone in the readings - more of warnings about judgement. There is a change in the tense of the verbs indicating that these things will happen sometime in the future. There is also a cautioning that we should be prepared, ready for the coming. What makes these Gospel readings difficult is that Jesus uses parables to describe either the Kingdom or the second coming. As you know, parables can sometimes be hard to understand and using the wrong method of interpreting them can lead us astray in our understanding, taking us down rabbit holes which take us further from where we really want to go. That said, we can turn to today's readings.

The Gospel readings for the next three weeks are from the fifth and last teaching discourse that Jesus gives to His disciples during Holy Week. It is often called the Olivet Discourse because it takes place on Mount Olivet, just outside of Jerusalem. In this discourse, Jesus is basically preparing His followers for the time when He is no longer with them. Throughout the discourse, Jesus talks about the end of times and what will happen if we are not prepared for when Jesus comes again. Behind these urgings to be prepared is the promise that Jesus will return.

Today's Gospel reading, the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids can be especially troubling and difficult to understand. When we apply the usual interpretative methods of understanding a parable, such as allegory or analogy, we try to see what all the parts of the parable represent. For example, what does the oil represent? Some have postulated that it represents our faith while others have said that it is our good works. Whatever we interpret the oil to represent, that representation falls apart rather quickly when we hear of the foolish bridesmaids as going to buy more. Another

example would be who do the wise and foolish bridesmaids represent? Is it a measure of one's faith or how long one has had faith? This would be inconsistent with other parts of the Gospels where Jesus says that the faith of a mustard seed is enough to move a mountain and where John tells us God wants to save all who believe in Jesus.

Possibly a better way to look at this parable is to look at it with broad brushstrokes, taking a bird's eye view of the parable and not try to go into too much detail. When we do this, we see that the parable is about watching and waiting. Yes, we do need to wait for the Lord's coming and watch for when He is coming. Even though we may 'fall asleep' during this time, it will be announced when the arrival of the Lord will be. The important thing is that we heed this call and are ready to react to it.

Along with our watching and waiting, we need to have trust. This may be a little harder to see from the text, but it is there. For example, the foolish bridesmaids do not trust that the bridegroom will show up before their oil runs out. They do not trust each other in that they believe that each of them needs their own lamp. How do we trust, knowing that it has been nearly 2000 years since the promise of the return of Jesus? We could be foolish bridesmaids and focus on things for ourselves, looking for what we need from some other source that may or may not be available to us when we want it. For example, was the oil dealer open or did they have to wait for the shop to open and did the dealer have enough oil for all of them? How far away was the dealer? These are just some of the immediate questions that would come to mind about the foolish bridesmaids in the first century. Today, those questions might read like where do we focus to provide what we need? Do we think that we have to do it all ourselves, or if not, on whom do we rely to provide for our needs? Are we like the Israelites of the Exodus at Mt. Sinai and build our own idols, thinking that Jesus is not coming; needing a visible symbol for our own comfort? Do we trust that God will remain true to His covenants that He made with humanity and that the New Covenant where Jesus will

reign as King over all creation will be fulfilled? Or do we abandon God totally and decide that our fate lies in our own hands and that we can do a better job?

Another problem with these end-of-times parables that we encounter is that of the expectations of the hearers. When the first hearers of these parables heard them, they were expecting Jesus to arrive within their lifetimes. When that did not happen, they were starting to worry, as the Thessalonians did to whom Paul was writing in the second reading for today. When their loved ones and fellow believers started to die, they wondered what was going on? Paul reassures them that they will not be left in their graves, forgotten and left to decay. Paul tells them that Jesus will remember them and they will rise again when He comes, just as He arose from the grave. Those who are living will then meet Jesus who will bring the Kingdom of God to earth. Now, nearly two thousand years after Jesus gave us those promises of His return, we are still waiting and wondering when it will happen. Despite our efforts to try to set the right conditions for Jesus to return, Jesus will return at the right time and will not forget any of the saints who have gone before us. The prophet Amos reminds us against trying to 'force' God to return because it may be turn out the way we want.

Even now, how should we watch and wait for our Lord to return? We are to do those things which bring light into the world. It is to stay focused on the source of that light, that is God, knowing that even if our light begins to dim, we can still turn to God to provide what we need to keep that light shining. Just as Jesus pointed to God as the source of what Jesus did and as Paul had pointed to Jesus for all that he did, we need to stay focused on Jesus and God as the source of all that we can do. We watch and wait, not by sitting around and hoping that Jesus will come again soon, but live as though He is already here - seeing others with compassion and providing for their needs. We live as though we see God in everyone whom we encounter and treat them as we would treat God.

Parables about the end of times and the Kingdom of God can be difficult to understand and sometimes seemingly impossible to understand. To be able to begin to understand these parables, we need to approach them from a different point of view. Traditionally, from a world's viewpoint we tend to see them from a win/lose or an either/or point of view. There are those who get the 'prize' while there are others who lose out. However, if we instead approach these parables from a lens of win/win or both/and point of view, we are able to rely on God that God will fulfill all the promises made to us; that the fulfillment of those promises will be far greater than we could either imagine or gain on our own. By using this lens, we can see how we are to wait - working together for the good of all people; keeping God's laws and following Jesus' teachings and not expecting there will always be time to do the right things. How much time do we have before the Judgement Day of the Second Coming? I don't know, but I trust that it will happen at the right time and I hope that we will be ready to welcome our King.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/Cx8IrUNXGKw>

Service: <https://youtu.be/NLtkmU6qSxY>