

23rd Sunday in Pentecost 2020

Readings - Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25, Psalm 78:1-7, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25:1-13

Introduction - We are approaching the end of the liturgical year with the coming season of Advent. Advent, from the latin word 'adventus' meaning the 'coming', is actually the start of the Christian calendar. It heralds the approach of Christmas. Christmas is a great season and everybody (even secular society) loves newborns. However before we get to Christmas we focus our thoughts on the second coming, which has both a joyous component and a judgment aspect.

Common Theme - There is a theme of impending judgement in our readings this week. In many versions of eschatology the day of judgement is often associated with the return of the Messiah. The creeds of the Church state that 'He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.' There is a tension between the victory that has been won at the cross and the forthcoming judgement at the hands of a just God.

Hebraic Perspective - The Parable of the Virgins touches on a sensitive subject; Eschatology! Within the realm of eschatology there are people who are addicted to Biblical prophecy, studying every verse of both Testaments, looking for signs of the times. And yet the knowledge that the Lord is close at hand doesn't appear to put us on our knees in repentance and worship. Unfortunately some of our brothers and sisters focus overly much on the signs themselves, missing the actual intent and purpose of the prophecy. The prophets of old challenged and rebuked the people of Israel to change their hearts and actions to avoid coming judgement. In similar fashion the Parable of the Virgins is to teach us to be in a place of readiness.

Reading #1; Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25 - Following the conquest of Canaan, Joshua presents a choice to the people of Israel, whom shall they serve? Choose between either the gods of the defeated pagan nations or the Lord who brought them out of Egypt and gave them the Land of Israel as an inheritance. There is no third choice! The choice comes with a warning of judgement should the people forsake the Lord. God will punish sin, in this case idolatry, should the people serve foreign gods. Approaching judgement should influence our behaviour towards the King of the universe.

Reading #2; Psalm 78:1-7 - This Psalm of Asaph, a great singer and composer for King David and Solomon, produces here, the longest of the historical psalms. The predominate theme is one of instruction, preparing for the future by learning from the past. Asaph recalls what the Lord has done, recounting His wonderful works and great deeds. Asaph reminds the people of God's laws and Torah with the hint of what happens should they be forgotten. He is teaching one generation to avoid the errors of the previous generation. By engaging in this retelling of the past, the present generation can also help the future generation prepare and get ready for the coming of the Lord.

Reading #3; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 - Verse 17 is often used as the 'proof text' for the rapture with the focus on the word ἀρπάζω (*harpazo*). The verse continues to say that we will then meet ἀπάντησις (*apantesis*) the Lord and ever be with Him. *Apantesis* is also used in the Gospel portion Matthew 25:1 where the virgins go out to meet the Bridegroom. In all instances where the word ἀπάντησις (*apantesis*) is used in Greek literature it describes the event of people going out of a city to meet an emissary, be that a dignity, a king, a bridegroom etc and then once meeting him proceeding to accompany him back into the city. Which is what you see happens to Paul in Acts 28:15 and here with the virgins who meet the Bridegroom. Thus in the context of the Epistle, the event Paul describes, known as the rapture, does not take you to Heaven. Rather it concerns part of the 2nd coming event to meet the Lord and accompany Him back to the Earth. As Jesus says

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'The meek shall inherit the Earth', not Heaven! Paul reminds the Thessalonians that the King is coming and we should keep ourselves in a state of readiness and not be lulled into passivity.

Reading #4; Matthew 25:1-13 - Matthew introduces the parable of the virgins in the context of the Kingdom of Heaven, which is the rule and reign of God. The culmination of the reign of God will entail His coming to the world in both glory and judgement. The parable is addressed to the believers. It is not directed at making a reference to the pagan world. The parable refers to only two groups of people, the wise and the foolish. There is no third group. Both groups of virgins have received invitations and both know that the bridegroom is coming. The virgins have accepted the invitation and have gone out to meet the bridegroom. We should note that the virgins are never accused of sleeping, both groups do that. The bridegroom takes his time, most likely this is unexpected, and the waiting goes long into the night. The tension in the parable is the lack of preparedness from one group of virgins. The message for us as believers is to be ready, to be prepared for the unexpected. God shows up when we least expect Him to do so. The next part of the scripture is the crucifixion which was totally unexpected by the disciples. The Judgement is coming and we need to be prepared. What does preparedness look like? It begins with repentance.

Hebraic Context - In many sermons and commentaries about this Parable, it is said that the oil is a representation of the Holy Spirit. In the Hebrew context oil does not always systematically refer to the Holy Spirit. And in this parable it certainly does not. For example you cannot buy the Holy Spirit. However in this parable, if the oil is a metaphor for the Spirit, then we see the foolish virgins go off and do just that. The wise virgins instruct the foolish ones to go buy oil. The foolish Virgins even return to the wedding banquet in possession of newly purchased oil and request entry, but they can not get in. The better analogy is that the oil actually represents preparedness.

The parable of the Virgins is found in all manuscripts of Matthew. And it contains the most terrifying words in all Scripture - 'I never knew you'. Rabbis would say these words to students who went astray. A disciple who did not learn from the Rabbi or imitate his teachings would be brought in front of the other students. Then the Rabbi would dismiss the bad student publicly by saying 'I never knew you'.

ACNA Addendum

Amos 5:18-24 - The prophet Amos delivers a timely warning to those addicted to Bible prophecy and those that long for the day for the Lord. Its not going to be a good day for all. Amos warns the people that they don't really know what they are asking for because the day of the Lord will bring judgement and not mercy. The potential exists that perhaps they end up worse than before. 'They encounter a bear while fleeing the lion' (verse 19). Amos ends his premonition proclaiming the desire of the Lord, that we would produce justice and righteousness in our lives today.

As the Rabbis say, 'Which day is better? The day of the Lord or a day of rain? The answer is: 'a day of rain' for rain will be a blessing on both the just and the unjust but the day of the Lord only for the righteous'.

Psalms 70 - In the context of our theme of judgement, this psalm concentrates on the positive aspects of the day of the Lord. That is, that the day of the Lord will bring deliverance, an end to shame, ridicule and persecution. The psalm sends a plea to the Lord to come quickly to the aid of

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the worshipper. The psalm reminds us all of the positive side of the 2nd coming. The return of Messiah will be a day of redemption, justice and deliverance for the believer. Those who delight in the salvation of God, despite suffering ridicule and persecution for those beliefs, will be vindicated in the strength of the Lord.