

JESUS WILL RETURN – BE READY FOR THE DAY!

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1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25:1-13

There is talk, from time to time, in the Scriptures and in the Church, of Jesus returning, the subject of today's NT and Gospel readings. Some of the talk in the Church is helpful, and some of it is not. For nearly 2000 years, people have predicted the timing of this event, despite Jesus' own words that NONE would know the exact day or time of it.

Thessalonika was an important city of the Roman Empire, situated on the northeast coast of Greece. St Paul's letter to the Christian community there addresses the subject. Concerned about "those who have already fallen asleep" – i.e. died – St Paul tells them that our expectation of life after death is based upon the resurrection of Jesus.

The Thessalonian church believed that Jesus would come back at the end of time, because Jesus himself said he would. Convinced that he may come soon, perhaps in their lifetime, they worry about how they and those who have already died can participate in this event. Paul tells them that all will be present at this rendezvous, those already dead in Christ, and then we who are alive.

Rather than inventing uncertain details (a sort-of-Hollywood scenario), Paul tells them only of essential facts that he knows:

An archangel will herald the Lord's return

We will share in the Lord's glory

We will be with the Lord forever

Moving the focus to our Gospel passage, the records of Jesus' words are unanimous and explicit on the subject: "Of that day and hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but the Father alone." There is nothing in the gospels to bolster speculation on the date of the end of this world, nor clear descriptions of exactly what will come to pass.

Jesus foretold the ruin of the Temple and of the city of Jerusalem, which came to pass in 70AD. He warned that his coming again would be "like a thief comes at night", i.e. without warning, and said that it would be a difficult and troubled time.

The purpose of warning us was to ensure we would prepare ourselves, to ensure that we are saved from God's wrath and punishment on all who have rejected him actively or by indifference.

He told several parables to teach on this subject, one of which we heard this morning, and which helps make clear how we must live today in the perspective of THE DAY (in capital letters) that will not fail to arrive, though we do not know its date.

The parable is based upon a fact, a situation of ordinary life. It tells of a custom connected with the wedding celebration. The bridesmaids – ten young girls – went to the house of the bride, waiting with her until the arrival of the bridegroom to lead her to his home. Then all went together to the wedding banquet.

But in this case, Jesus introduces unlikely aspects into the story to make a point. These include:

- ✓ The interminable lateness of the bridegroom, who (most unusually) keeps people waiting until the middle of the night!
- ✓ The errand of the 5 maidens wanting to buy oil, at that time of night
- ✓ The closing of the door to the banquet hall, so contrary to oriental customs of hospitality and scandalous on the part of the groom who said to the latecomers, “I do not know you.”
- ✓ To these we could add the fact that the young girls who had taken a supply of oil are NOT reproached for refusing to share with those who had insufficient oil to keep their lamps burning long enough.

But a parable is not told as an actual event, accurate to the last detail. As we well know, storytellers can legitimately exaggerate parts to fit their purpose.

Understanding this, the meaning is clear:

- ✓ We shall be kept waiting for the Lord’s coming
- ✓ It will happen suddenly and be unforeseen
- ✓ At that moment, everything will be lost for those who were taken by surprise; others will be unable to help them. They will find a closed door in the Kingdom where the wedding feast of the groom (Jesus) and his bride (the Church) is being celebrated.

This explains why the 5 who had no extra oil for their lamps are described as foolish. They have demonstrated the lack of wisdom that characterizes those who fail to reckon with God. (Ps. 14: The fool says in his heart, “There is no God”.)

In other gospel passages (not read today), Jesus warns that the Day of the Lord would come in a time of wars, famines, earthquakes and persecution of the faithful. He also warned of false Messiahs, offering salvation or claiming to be the Messiah, or taking the

place in people's lives reserved for the worship of God. People would live as they did in the time of Noah, ignoring the call to repent and continuing their rebellion against God as if nothing could ever touch them – until they had to learn to tread water! But no one will know the exact hour!

Throughout the centuries, people have tried to make accurate predictions. Some groups of Christians in the 4th Century spent months waiting in the deserts of North Africa, having decided that events of their time (incl. wars, famine and earthquakes) indicated the Lord's imminent return. Their skeletons are still waiting, presumably buried by the desert sands!

You are invited to the wedding. Keep watch; remain attentive – to your life, to your relationship with God. Keep watch, for you know neither the day nor the hour of Lord's coming.

In a sense, the passage of time is irrelevant to God ... except in terms of how we live in time and what we do with it that will have eternal consequences.

Our baptism, our relationship with God and our faith in him, all tell us that we are already in eternal life, and physical death is only a transition to the full reality of it. It tells us that God is real and amongst us (Immanuel), not distant. We remind ourselves frequently that "The Lord is here", but sometimes that seems abstract, and if Jesus were to walk in here right now in bodily form we'd get a shock and would probably want a chance to re-evaluate our lives and their priorities.

Last Sunday we had opportunity to give thanks, publicly and privately, for the gifts and blessings of God in our and other's lives and in our church. We also had opportunity to re-dedicate ourselves in service to God, and will do so again in the words of the liturgy at the end of this and every Eucharist.

Our purpose is to build God's Kingdom by spreading and living the gospel. We are a people living in the knowledge of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, responding thankfully, of knowing that we will one day face Jesus, and dedicating ourselves to being ready for that Day.

Even if Jesus' physical return and the Day of Judgment is a long way off, many of us have been especially conscious recently of how suddenly and without preparation that day could come for individuals. It has been a hard time with several unexpected deaths in the last couple of months – 3 people in motor accidents, one person this week in suicide after years of deep depression, and the relative of another being killed in the street by an intoxicated driver.

All of us WILL meet Jesus face to face at some point, whether after falling under the proverbial bus, or on the Day of Judgement, or at some unknown point in history when Jesus will return in person to earth at the end of our world, as we currently know it.

The way in which we meet him is incidental to the fact that we SHALL meet him, and therefore need to be ready for that event!