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Sermon

The World's Last Night

Matthew 24:36-44

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In 1843 a man called William Miller predicted that Jesus would return to this world on March the 21st. Thousands waited for the Lord at midnight on the 21st and went home to a late breakfast followed by the jeers of a drunkard.

It is stories like this and other strange sounding texts in the Bible that give the truth of the return of our Lord a bad name

Yet just because something is abused does not mean it has no use at all. Drugs properly used are keeping many of us alive and yet are abused terribly throughout the world. Nuclear power is a great blessing used properly and a great terror if not.

So, what do we do with this doctrine? How do we find its proper purpose for us?

Today's Gospel reading is part of a long section in which Jesus is warning of things that will happen within the life time of His hearers on the one hand and teaching of His return on the other. His teaching about His return can be summarised under three headings.

1. He will return. "God is working His purpose out as year succeeds to year", as the Hymn writer tells us.

We do not live in a random world that came about by time plus chance, a world that has no purpose or reason for existing going from dark emptiness to dark emptiness. This myth is one of the ruling stories of our age. It is no surprise that this has been called the "Age of Anxiety". No wonder that the great tragedy of suicide is so prevalent in our Society. We are a secular Nation. What is there to hope for but a life of endless struggle with occasional bursts of happiness and joy and then oblivion?

The doctrine of Christ's return bursts onto this scene of hopelessness like a blazing light. Someone is in charge. God is still working out His plan and purpose. We may not, in fact we probably don't, see what that is. We may not know if we are in act one of the drama or nearing the conclusion. But drama there is and the Divine playwright there is, and His purpose will win out in the end.

That is the power and purpose of this doctrine. We are not fools to trust that the God we have come to know and love, by His grace alone, is utterly trustworthy. Obedience to Him is not only wise, it also makes sense in a world that has lost its way.

2. We cannot possibly know when He will return. Let us not be fooled by the William Millers of this world. We have been told by the Master Himself that not only do we not know but neither does He! Only the Father knows.

Let me repeat that; ***We don't know when and neither does Jesus! Only the Father knows.***

So please do not waste your time or His trying to find out. We have been given other tasks to do. Let's focus on them.

3. We must be ready for His return at any time. Because you don't know when He will come "Keep watch".

But it is so frustrating! If only He would tell us. We are fairly reasonable folk. A little word in our ear wouldn't hurt surely.

Folks, it is no use asking Jesus. He doesn't know; only the Father knows.

OK, let's ask Him. Hold on a sec! Are you really going to go to the Father and ask Him to tell you when He hasn't told His own Son? I don't think I would like to be in the throne room when that question was asked. We may not like the answer He would give.

No, we must be content with what has been revealed by Our Lord and get on with learning to follow and grow like Him day by day.

That is why that in the next section of His teaching Jesus goes on to tell us what that daily walk is going to be like. He gives us three parables to illustrate this. They are all well-known: the Parable of the Ten Virgins; the Parable of the Talents; the Sheep and the Goats.

1. The Ten Virgins had a simple but important task. In that culture even to the present-day weddings can be held in the middle of the night. Torch light processions are not unusual, and these young women had the task of lighting the Bridegrooms way. Five had brought extra oil for their lamps five had not and the Bride groom is delayed. Only five can now light the way.

What does this say about the tasks that Jesus has given us? Simply that we need to be wise in all our dealings. A colourful procession is spoilt because five young women lacked the prudence to carry extra oil.

There is a whole book of the Bible devoted to the subject of wisdom. It is well worth reading again and again if we wish to be wise people. There you will learn little homely axioms of everyday life many of which come down to common sense. Today however we have elevated the pursuit of knowledge above the pursuit of wisdom and so there is not always sense that is common and some common sense does not make any sense at all.

Being prepared for Jesus return includes learning wisdom.

2. The Parable of the Talents. Three men were entrusted by the Master with some of his money to look after and develop while the Master was away on a long journey. They were given five, two and one talent each according to his ability. (A talent was what a manual labourer could earn in 15 years. So, it was a substantial sum.)

Two invested wisely and gave their Master a handsome return on His investment. The third because he was afraid of his Master buried the money and gave exactly what his Master had given. Needless to say, the Master was not best pleased and tossed the lazy servant out.

To whom much is given, much is expected. We have each been given abilities and gifts. We as a Church have been given the greatest story ever told and need to spend all our time and effort finding out how to communicate that message to a desperately needy world. Notice that the Master gave to each "according to their ability". No one is being asked for what they cannot do. Only faithfulness in the things they can. If you are a leader in some great enterprise, do it well. If you are labourer, then do it well. If you are called to preach do it well. If you are called to volunteer do it well. It doesn't matter what task you have ALL work done in obedience to God is acceptable. Listen to St Paul, "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because your labour in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15: 58.) Work that prepares for the coming of Jesus is work every day work done for Him.

3. Finally, there is the story of the Sheep and the Goats. It is according to the commentaries not a parable but a scene from the exalted Lord Jesus now taking His rightful place as judge of the Nations of this world. The

standard by which the Nations are judged is how they responded to the least the last and the lost in their midst. The striking thing here is that is what is NOT done that is the problem, for each time we ignore “one of the least of these” we are ignoring Jesus Himself. When the most needy, the most trampled on, the most vulnerable are ignored, we are in the greatest danger of ignoring Jesus Himself.

So, the final thing that prepares us for His return is caring for the most vulnerable, and the most despised in our world.

The Return of Jesus thus not only gives us hope in a world full of anxiety, but also the encouragement to know that we will either be ready to welcome Him with joy or hide from Him in shame. The choice as always is ours.