



## Worship resources - includes sermon outline

### INTRODUCTIONS

*For use by lectors, in order of service, parish bulletins and magazines*

**The First Reading** - Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25

The covenant is renewed at Shechem

**The Psalm** - Psalm 78: 1-7

**The Second Reading** - 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Paul specifically addresses a major issue of concern for the recipients of the letter -- what will become of the members of the community who die before the *parousia*.

**The Gospel Reading** - Matthew 25: 1-13

We may think of the saints chiefly as martyrs, or as those who have died in faith. They are included, but not alone. With them are the saints of today, those of us who live in faith.

[Click here to view the readings](#)

[http://bible.oremus.org/?show\\_adj=no&passages=Joshua%2024:%201-3a,%2014-25%0Acw%20Psalm%2078:%201-7%0A1%20Thessalonians%204:%2013-18%0AMatthew%2025:%201-13](http://bible.oremus.org/?show_adj=no&passages=Joshua%2024:%201-3a,%2014-25%0Acw%20Psalm%2078:%201-7%0A1%20Thessalonians%204:%2013-18%0AMatthew%2025:%201-13)

### COLLECTS OF THE DAY

#### Collect One

O Lord, we beseech thee,  
absolve thy people from their offences;  
that through thy bountiful goodness  
we may all be delivered from the bonds of those sins,  
which by our frailty we have committed;

Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake,  
our blessed Lord and Saviour.

### **Collect Two**

Almighty Father,  
whose will is to restore all things  
in your beloved Son, the king of all:  
Govern the hearts and minds of those in authority,  
and bring the families of the nations,  
divided and torn apart by the ravages of sin,  
to be subject to his just and gentle rule;  
who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE 1**

#### *President*

We bring our prayers for the church, the world and our communities to our wise and loving Father who is always ready to hear us and to act in and through our lives.

#### *Prayers*

Heavenly Father we pray for ourselves and for all our brothers and sisters in Christ. Give us the wisdom and determination to keep ourselves faithful to the love you show to us in the life of Jesus, your son and our living Lord.

Heavenly Father, we pray for the nations of this world. Turn us away from the foolish roads we follow which lead only to conflict, injustice and oppression. Show us your ways of wisdom that we may learn to be at peace in a world governed by justice for all your children.

Heavenly Father we pray for all in our community who live and wait with distressing uncertainty. We pray for those who are unemployed and looking for work; for people who are homeless, living in poverty and waiting to find security and the means to buy food and clothes.

Heavenly Father, we pray for all we know who live and wait in the darkness of illness, pain and bereavement and for all who face the ending of their lives in this world. Be a comforting presence alongside them and give them the assurance of your love, strength and peace.

#### *President*

Father we commit into your hands those for whom we have prayed today. We

ask that you will forgive our foolishness, bless us with wisdom and speak to us as we seek to know your will for our lives. We offer these prayers to you in the name of your son and our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE 2

We pray for the coming of God's kingdom.

You sent your Son to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom to captives and salvation to your people: anoint us with your Spirit; rouse us to work in his name.

Father, by your Spirit bring in your kingdom.

Send us to bring help to the poor and freedom to the oppressed.

Father, by your Spirit bring in your kingdom.

Send us to tell the world the good news of your healing love.

Father, by your Spirit bring in your kingdom.

Send us to those who mourn, to bring joy and gladness instead of grief.

Father, by your Spirit bring in your kingdom.

Send us to proclaim that the time is here for you to save your people.

Father, by your Spirit bring in your kingdom.

Lord of the Church, hear our prayer, and make us one in mind and heart to serve you in Christ our Lord. Amen.

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE 3 - Remembrance

### The Church of Christ

Lord, you know that our Church is riven with theological and ecclesiastical disagreement, beliefs honestly and sincerely held, but apparently irreconcilable. You test us by fire, searching and probing our hearts and our motives in the dark of the night. We pray for judgment to come forth from you through your holy spirit, for your eyes to discern what is right and make your judgment known unto us. And then we ask, O Lord, for your strength to do your will.

*Lord, take the sword from our hands and wield it with truth and with healing: in your mercy, hear our prayer*

### Creation, human society, the Sovereign and those in authority

Lord, like the psalmist of old, we are angry at the ways of the brutal on earth. Afraid of their cruelty and greed, we tremble on the point of their swords. Yet the hammer of our words and our cries stays poised in the air, for we know the evil in our own hearts, the lying, the pride and the arrogance. Purge us of all self-righteousness and hatred. Even as we pray for your justice, that oppressors may triumph no more, so we pray for our deliverance too. Let justice roll down like waters, righteousness like an overflowing stream.

*Lord, take the sword from our hands and wield it with truth and with healing: in your mercy, hear our prayer*

### **The local community**

Lord, dependent as we are on your faithfulness, save us through judgment tempered with mercy. Protector of those who come to you for refuge, show us the wonders of your steadfast love. In all those difficulties we face as a community, where it seems we cannot make our collective voice heard by those in positions of power, help us to believe that victory is not always on the side of the big battalions, so long as the cause is just.

*Lord, take the sword from our hands and wield it with truth and with healing: in your mercy, hear our prayer*

### **Those who suffer**

Lord, when we face pain, whether physical or mental, hide us under the shadow of your wings. When we are afraid of what the future may bring, keep us as the apple of your eye. When we become engrossed in our own troubles, help us to lift up our eyes to the lives of our neighbours, and to offer them friendship, comfort and help in your name.

*Lord, take the sword from our hands and wield it with truth and with healing: in your mercy, hear our prayer*

### **The communion of saints**

Lord, keep alive in us the memory of those dear to us whom you have called to yourself. And grant that every remembrance which turns our hearts from things seen to things unseen may lead us always upwards to you, till we come to our eternal rest. For we know that our Redeemer lives, and lives for evermore.

*Lord, take the sword from our hands and wield it with truth and with healing: in your mercy, hear our prayer*

## POST COMMUNION

God of peace,  
whose Son Jesus Christ proclaimed the kingdom  
and restored the broken to wholeness of life:  
Look with compassion on the anguish of the world,  
and by your healing power  
make whole both people and nations;  
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

## PRAYERS

O Holy God of Israel,  
you faithfully keep the promises  
you made to our ancestors  
and lead your people into the future,  
providing hospitality on the way.  
Help us who inherit the pilgrim life  
to journey faithfully at your command,  
that we may be a band of disciples  
called to be sojourners in your service. Amen.

God of captives and pilgrims,  
you brought your people home from despair  
and gave them a land of freedom and plenty.  
Look in mercy on us your servants,  
deliver us from the prison of selfishness and sin,  
and bring us home to justice, sharing, and compassion,  
the realm you promised all the world  
in Jesus Christ the Saviour. Amen.

God of life, we praise you for your abiding presence  
from generation to generation,  
blessing your people,  
strengthening us to lives of service,  
empowering us to witness.  
Hear the prayers we offer on behalf of your creation.

Grant that as we serve you now on earth,  
so we may one day rejoice with all the saints  
in your kingdom of light and peace,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

You let us choose, O God,  
between you and the false gods of this world.  
In the midst of the night of sin and death,  
wake us from our slumber  
and call us forth to greet Christ,  
so that with eyes and hearts fixed on him,  
we may follow to eternal light. Amen.

Ever-living God,  
you inscribe our names in your book of life  
so that we may share in the firstfruits of salvation.  
Grant that we may acknowledge Christ as our redeemer  
and, trusting in him,  
be confident that none of your own will be lost or forgotten.  
We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord. Amen.

## LECTIONARY NOTES

### **Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25**

The closing address in the book of Joshua is a brilliant example of ancient Israelite rhetoric.

Joshua's farewell speech is designed to reinvigorate the people's commitment to the LORD who had delivered them from slavery and given them victory in their battles for the Promised Land. Broad resonances with Moses' farewell speech (Deuteronomy 29-30) underline the continuity of Joshua's authority with that of Moses and reinforce the importance of covenant renewal for the ongoing faithfulness of God's people.

Joshua begins with a rhetorical move that would have alarmed an ancient Israelite audience: he names their origin among Mesopotamians who worshipped other gods. Joshua chooses to present their ancestor Abraham not as a venerable leader chosen to become a blessing for all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3), nor as a steadfast believer whose trust in the LORD's promises was reckoned as righteousness (Genesis 15:6), but simply as an outsider brought from Ur of the Chaldeans (Genesis 11:31).

While some traditions visible in Joshua 24 are not entirely consonant with Deuteronomistic concepts, it is likely that we should hear a veiled warning in Joshua's opening line, given that worship of other gods was strictly forbidden in the Deuteronomistic worldview and given the overall force of Joshua's speech. The Israelites are given to understand that they have come from idolatrous foreign roots; the audience thus is invited into this discourse from a position of marginality.

Because Joshua's speech is a beautifully crafted rhetorical whole, preachers may want to take account of the intervening material that is omitted in the lectionary (verses 3b-13). A few words concerning the omitted material may help to set the stage for homiletical work with the rest of the lectionary-appointed text. The intervening verses articulate powerfully the grounds on which the Israelites should be grateful to God. First they hear of God's gracious giving to the patriarchs: "I gave him [that is, Abraham] Isaac; and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir..."(verses 3-4). More divine graciousness is on view in God's sending of Moses and Aaron, as well as in God's striking Egypt with plagues to compel the pharaoh to let the enslaved Israelites go (verse 5).

Next named is God's protection of the Israelites during their flight from Egypt and in their battles with Canaanite armies (verses 6-12). The recital of God's sovereignty concludes on a renewed note of gracious gift: "I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns you had not built . . . you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant" (verse 13).

Worth noting in this material is an elegant semantic maneuver that connects the ancestors from ancient times with the Israelite audience in the present moment of the text. "They" and "you" pronouns and verbs alternate in a way that deftly interweaves the history of the ancestors with the identity of the Israelites now listening to Joshua.

The alternation is most striking in the narration of Israel's liberation from Egypt: "afterwards I brought *you* out. When I brought *your ancestors* out of Egypt, *you* came to the sea. . . When *they* cried out to the LORD, he put darkness between *you* and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and *your eyes* saw what I did to Egypt," (verses 5-7). This artful interweaving teaches the people to know themselves as constituted and preserved by God's marvelous grace even now -- fully in continuity with the redemption enjoyed by generations past.

The implied audience is meant to be utterly mastered by this rhetoric, overcome by awe and gratitude for what the LORD has done. The Israelites have been brought by God from outsider status to the status of a beloved and protected community. Led through the trauma of slavery and the terror of military conflict, Israel has finally arrived at the joy of peaceful dwelling in a fruitful land. As Joshua constructs it, this people have emerged from the fraught mists of historical memory into the rich abundance of a present in which all has been graciously provided by their invincible God. They can only rejoice to bow before a God so strong to save.

Now Joshua presses them to commit themselves anew to the LORD, thundering, "Choose this day whom you will serve!" By this point in Joshua's magnificent speech, there is no real choice at all: Israel may serve the old foreign gods of Mesopotamia, or the shamed gods of the defeated Amorites -- or they may serve the LORD, whose mighty hand and outstretched arm have brought countless generations of Israelites safely through times of brutal deprivation and fierce conflict. At the climactic moment of decision, the hero Joshua offers a stirring and unexpectedly intimate confession that invites every hearer into community with him: ". . . as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (verse 15).

What follows is an extraordinarily effective dialogue that underlines what is at risk for the believing community. First, the people affirm God's saving power, elaborating on what Joshua had narrated with new phrases that demonstrate the depth of their understanding of their own history of redemption. They commit themselves to the LORD in no uncertain terms: "he is our God" (verse 18). But Joshua heightens the drama of the moment, emphasizing the terrible risk they face in undertaking to serve the LORD. This God will turn and consume them if their faith and their halakhic observance ever waver.

Loving and serving the LORD is possible only for those who will never again seek a different way! The implied audience knows this risk all too well, for they were watching, narratologically speaking, not only when the walls of Jericho miraculously fell (6:20) but also when the transgressor Achan and his family were obliterated from within the community (7:24-26). And so the Israelites dare do nothing other than affirm their faith in the LORD. There is only one viable way forward: to love this gracious, terrifying God who demands passionate, lifelong service with all the heart, soul, and might (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Joshua 24 invites each hearer into profound gratitude for the unmerited graciousness of God. Covenant is a matter of discerning who God has been to us and who we are called to be -- this is true of Israel's enduring covenant with God (Isaiah 40:8; Romans 11:28-29) and true of the new covenant that Christians affirm in Jesus Christ. This spiritually formative text brims with riches for homileticians.

The preacher could focus on the challenges of the spiritual journey from "foreignness" to being at home in God; or she could explore the joys and risks involved in daring to offer to God our whole selves, including our past and our future. The preacher might witness to the cost of discipleship for every believing community that is set apart from the ways of the world; or underline the powerful continuity of memory and hope linking us with our ancestors in the faith; or offer anew that dramatic moment of choice, whether understood



as a pivotal conversion decision or as a continuous opportunity for every faithful person in daily living.

## LECTIONARY NOTES

### 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Today's text from 1 Thessalonians is the fourth lection in a series of five consecutive Sunday reading through the New Testament's earliest extant writing.

Given the opportunity to work through an entire writing like a letter of Paul, many preachers may already be preparing their fourth sermon on 1 Thessalonians. If this has not been the case, however, this section of the first letter to the Thessalonians designated for the twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost is certainly deserving of its own focus.

First, it is here that Paul specifically addresses a major issue of concern for the recipients of the letter -- what will become of the members of the community who die before the *parousia*. This is a very real problem for the Thessalonians, and Paul's response represents the pastoral nature of the issue. Secondly, as such, we are afforded a glimpse of both the theological concerns with which early believers in Christ wrestled and therefore, the role of Paul as pastor, not as the systematic theologian that we often assume him to be. Paul's ability to interpret the meaning of Christ into the contextual and situational matters of his congregations should give preachers pause for reflection while also pointing to the breadth of theological issues of concern as Paul works out the implications of the "gospel of God" (2:2, 8, 9) without even mention of justification by faith. Third, it is this text that narrates what most of our parishioners understand as "The Rapture." A sermon on this passage can provide an opportunity to:

- correct and clarify this dominant image in our culture
- talk about the intended purpose and function of apocalyptic
- re-situate a supposed "end-time" event back into the communal needs of a real congregation

Then, their story truly can be our story.

The sections of text appointed for the lectionary up to this point have not included readings from chapter three or the first part of chapter four. When last we heard from 1 Thessalonians, Paul reminded the congregation of his own work to support the ongoing mission of proclaiming the "gospel of God." He also urged the congregation to "lead a life worthy of God," and offered additional thanksgiving for the Thessalonians' reception of God's word

(2:9-13). In the rest of chapter two and the first part of chapter three, Paul expresses his desire to be with the Thessalonians in person. The remaining verses of chapter three are devoted to Timothy's report about his visit which is the impetus for Paul's correspondence (3:6-13). In chapters four and five of the letter, Paul appeals to the Thessalonians to live according to the faith they have already exemplified. This faith is the grounds for encouragement to and steadfastness in living a life pleasing to God (4:1-12), a life that they are already doing but that they "should do so more and more" (4:1). 4:13 marks a shift in emphasis to the coming of the Lord as the very real expectation of the *parousia* in Paul's lifetime comes to the surface. If preaching only this Sunday on Thessalonians, the preacher should consider extending the pericope through 5:11 as 5:1-11 unpack the implications of the *parousia* (see commentary for next week).

What now appears at the forefront of Paul's discussion is the concept of hope, first mentioned in 1:3. While Paul calls upon the familiar triad "faith, hope, and love" in 1 Thessalonians, the last two are reversed (faith, love, and hope) as hope is lifted up. In 4:13, Paul draws upon this "steadfastness of hope" (1:3) as the source from which the Thessalonians will draw comfort, encouragement, and faith in the face of their loss.

Their hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ (1:3), but specifically in the imminence of Jesus' return. This is a hope that is not a generalized or ethereal category but a concretized hope in the specific promise of the resurrected Christ who will come again. This is a hope that is not simply a future wish, but one that lays claim on life now, that makes a difference for how life is lived and what is at stake. In fact, it is hope that distinguishes believers from others. Paul then describes the basis of this hope—that Jesus died and rose again (4:14). In Greek, the condition that begins 4:14 is a condition of fact or reality, best translated, "for *since* we believe." This creedal statement grounds the hope of the return of Jesus in what Jesus has already done and, therefore, makes the imagery that follows not wishful fancy but the comforting presence of Christ.

In 4:13, Paul indicates that what follows is not new information for the Thessalonians. It is what they already know, what they already believe, and what they have already been promised. But the reimagining of the coming of Jesus is the comfort and consolation they need at this particular time in the face of death. It is important to note that Paul is not saying the community should not grieve. On the contrary, grief is the expected emotion when faced with the painful loss of a loved one. At the same time, the grief of the believer is grounded in and defined by hope. This interconnectedness of the profound emotions of grief and hope is a mark of a community who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. As surely as God will bring those who have died, by the word

of the Lord, those still alive will join them and will never (strong future denial) precede them. The term translated "left" is used in Thessalonians 4:15 and 17 is the only reference in the entire New Testament. The coming (parousia; cf. 2:19, 3:13, 4:15: 5:23) of the Lord is stated emphatically with the pronoun ("the Lord *himself*") and by the apocalyptic language that follows. The images are thoroughly apocalyptic (angel, trumpet of God, clouds), and it is important to remember that the primary function of this genre was comfort and encouragement in times of great distress or persecution.

What happens next is not the tribulation of those left behind, but the union of those who have died with those who mourn their passing. This unity is underscored by the term *hama* which means "at the same time" or "together" and the preposition *syn* ("with"), "together with them" (4:17). The use of *syn* here recalls verse 14, "God will bring *with* him those who have died," and will be used again at the end of the verse, "and so we will be with the Lord forever." All will be "snatched up" ("seize," "carry off") toward a meeting with the Lord in the air. The final verse of the pericope for the day emphasizes the meaning of Paul's vision. This is about comfort (*parakaleō*), which is the purpose of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, what the Lord provides and will provide even in his absence, the function of apocalyptic, and that which the community gives to one another. At the same time that Paul offers this extraordinary vision of consolation, he locates the act of consolation within the community as an ongoing (present imperative) expression of hope.

## LECTIONARY NOTES

### Matthew 5:1-12

- This is a strong text for All Saints tide especially if we use the word "saints" as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 1:2: "to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..."

We may think of the saints chiefly as martyrs, or as those who have died in faith. They are included, but not alone. With them are the saints of today, those of us who live in faith. The Beatitudes are more for living saints than for those who have died. The pronouncements of blessing Jesus offers here are in the present and future tenses, not in the past tense. "Blessed *are* ... for they *will*..."

*Makarios* is the Greek word Jesus uses. It means blessed, fortunate, happy, privileged. But, it seems wrong in the context of these statements. Each is a declaration of irony. Clearly the poor in body and spirit, the mournful, and the meek are not fortunate to be in their present circumstances. They are not happy in any usual sense.

In the early church, the makarios, the happy ones, sometimes referred to the martyrs. It is hard to picture a smile on the face of Polycarp or Justin as they were being burned or beheaded. Yet, "blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake," Jesus declares.

How can blessedness be associated with such unpleasant things? On the one hand, it is not. The present state of affairs for believers may include poverty, broken spirit, humility, and mourning. Blessed are they, Jesus says. But, clearly not because of their circumstances.

Their blessing lies in being a part of the kingdom of God that exists both in the present and in the future. The verbs "are" and "will" indicate that God is at work in the present world, bringing the kingdom to completion. Those within the present kingdom of God who "are" in difficult circumstances "will be" blessed when God brings about the new creation.

The hope they have, however, is not merely an eschatological one. It occurs in the present in the sense that such people are found living according to kingdom values. This is true for the faithful who are humble and poor, and is even more evident among those who show mercy, strive for peace, are pure in heart, and who endure persecution for Jesus' sake. The kingdom of heaven is not only for the poor in spirit, but for all who are sanctified.

"The kingdom of heaven has come near," both John (3:2) and Jesus (4:17) declare. The signs of the kingdom are the people who live according to its values. Further, they assist in bringing the kingdom about when they demonstrate mercy and work for peace. Such work is never for the saint to accomplish alone, but is aided and enabled by the King of the kingdom who makes all things new. "Sanctified in Christ Jesus" means that we are saints, but that it is Christ who brings about all possibility of goodness.

What can all of this mean for the saints to whom we preach on All Saint's Day? It means that we align ourselves today with the historic chorus of people who have been sanctified by Christ, people who in happiness or difficulty, found their hope in Jesus and made their way as part of the kingdom of God. We join their work in the present as people who live according to the kingdom values outlined by Jesus in this Sermon on the Mount. Our blessings reside both in the present and the future.

First, we "are" living within the reign of God, sanctified by Christ, part of an enterprise beyond our grasp or understanding, yet, fully in God's hands. We are blessed to belong to the kingdom that is moving ever toward a new creation and blessed to live and act in ways that bring the kingdom about. Second, we are blessed because as members of this kingdom, we "will"

receive the fortune and privilege that awaits all those who remain faithful to the kingdom's work.

To make this concrete in the sermon, and to bring it home to the people in local congregations, the preacher can be on the lookout for stories that show the kingdom of heaven alive in our midst. The stories may be of local saints who have died in faith, but can also be of those (used with permission) who demonstrate the living irony of those who endure seasons of challenge while giving life to others.

One thinks of a widow or widower who moves forward through grief to discover a new ministry and reason to live; or, the meek person who demonstrates life-giving power in difficult circumstances. In most ministry settings, such examples abound and are available to the perceptive preacher.

## LECTIONARY NOTES

### **Matthew 5:1-12**

The fairy tale ending we all hope for does not happen in this parable.

In fact, many of the parables contradict our hopes, our expectations, even our values. But surprisingly, they also contradict our deep-seated fears and insecurities. How much easier it would be to preach these Matthean parables if the Bridegroom or the Master were more generous and inviting. Attempts, of course, have been made to re-write the ending but that is not the preacher's task.

This parable (part of the eschatological discourse), along with the other "watchful" parables in the preceding chapter of Matthew's Gospel, challenge our quickly made assumptions about judgment, grace and the end times. It would be too easy, as we have witnessed in the history of interpretation, to allegorize the characters in this parable in terms of simply good and bad. The definitions we give "good" and "bad" have always reflected our own prejudices more than they have faithfully represented Gospel truth. Even the oil in the lamps has been denominationally (and unfortunately polemically) interpreted as works (you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven without good works) or faith (you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven without faith). We are challenged to move beyond these simplistic bipolarities.

The Matthean community is, of course, dealing with several issues -- rupture from the synagogue, a delayed parousia, flagging vigilance. What is striking in this parable, which appears to focus on the severity of judgment, is the confinement of judgment to one character -- the bridegroom. Judgment is reserved to the only one who can judge (see Romans 14 but also Matthew 7). Even the wise young women do not judge the foolish one; they merely refuse

to share their oil and send the foolish women to the shopkeepers. The history of interpretation, of course, has not remained faithful to this reserve. It has quickly assigned qualities to the foolish and the wise and lifted these qualities up as virtues and vices. In other words, the tradition has continually judged who is good and bad.

The young women were all waiting for the bridegroom. They all belonged to the same community, the same group of friends. They all fall asleep waiting for the bridegroom to come. Within the community, it is impossible to tell who has enough oil in their lamps, who has been more faithful. This is not for us to see or to judge. The church remains always a mixed community. Making the center of interpretation the issue of foolish or wise would miss the point of the parable. The so-called foolish young women also knew the bridegroom, calling out to him "Lord, Lord, open to us!" (v.11).

That they remain unrecognized by the bridegroom raises the question of knowledge in the parable. What is it to know the bridegroom? What is it to recognize the one called "Lord?"

The cry "Lord, Lord," takes us back to the earlier chapters of Matthew's Gospel. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (7:21). And, of course, the lamps (or torches) recall other words in the Sermon on the Mount: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (5:16).

Living or waiting (maybe even sleeping) with enough oil in our lamps, when set in the context of these earlier chapters, suggests that it is the spirit of the beatitudes that, above all else, characterizes those who recognize the bridegroom, the Lord. This spirit is the spirit of the cross that disrupts all of our categories, all of our judgmental predispositions. The life into which the beatitudes invite us is a life not centered on our works, not on our faith, but on the cross and how God is glorified through our lives.

The holy possession of the cross (as Luther calls the seventh mark of the church) is not really a possession (as if we "owned" the cross or some special access to God). It is a life that is characterized by choices that make it clear God is the actor and the giver of life. In Luther's words, a community that is characterized by the holy possession of the cross is a community that knows suffering: "They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ." This description hardly fits what we would imagine under the nomenclature "wise

young women," yet in the context of Matthew's Gospel, this is precisely the suggestion.

Those who are enduring misfortune, even poverty, for Christ's sake are not the one who will be quick to judge others. Judgment is now purely reserved for God who alone knows or recognizes each individual. Grace is in the cross that lets shine forth a light, a light so unique that people do not praise our good works but rather praise God who is acting and giving life in the midst of suffering, life in the midst of death, opening the door to those who have engaged the way of the cross, who have engaged the way of death. The world cannot understand this way. It does not recognize the Lord though it continually cries out, "Lord, Lord!"

The parousia becomes not a one-time event at some "end point" but rather a continuous event that involves us, the community of Christ, in our baptismal vocation: living in the light of the cross, in mercy not judgment. The feast to which we are invited is, in the words of Philipp Nicolai (who used this parable as a primary metaphor in the hymn "Wake, Awake"), the "Abendmahl" -- the Lord's Supper. The parousia is now not about a far-off event but Christ's continual presence with us through all of our waiting.

## SERMON OUTLINE

### Matthew 25:1-13

It is too bad we know Jesus's stories so well, or think we do. We have read them so often and heard them expounded in so many sermons that we have all but lost the capacity for hearing them even, let alone for hearing what they are really about. His stories are like photographs that have been exposed to the light so long they have faded almost beyond recognition. They are like family anecdotes so ancient and time-honored we groan at their approach. And what a pity that is when you think what rich stories they are till preachers start making a homiletic shambles of them--so full of surprises and sudden reversals and sad Jewish comedy before people start delivering sermons about them.

The worst of it, of course, is the way we think we know what Jesus's stories mean. Heaven knows people like me who ought to know better have explained the life out of them often enough, have tried so hard to pound the point in that more often than not all you can hear is the pounding. The story about the good Samaritan, for instance. Is the point of it that our neighbor is anybody who needs us and that loving our neighbor means doing whatever needs to be done even if it costs an arm and a leg to do it? That is a good point as points go, but does getting it mean that now we can move on to the next story? How about the one about the wise women

who fill their lamps with oil and the foolish ones who forget to, so that when Love himself looms up out of the night with vine leaves in his hair and his eyes aflame, they are left in the dark while the others go in to the marriage supper to have the time of their lives. Having gotten whatever the point of that one is, can we move on again and suck the next one dry?

If we think the purpose of Jesus's stories is essentially to make a point as extractable as the moral at the end of a fable, then the inevitable conclusion is that once you get the point, you can throw the story itself away like the rind of an orange when you have squeezed out the juice. Is that true? How about other people's stories? What is the point of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the *Iliad* or *For Whom the Bell Tolls*? Can we extract the point in each case and frame it on the living-room wall for our perpetual edification?

Or is the story itself the point and truth of the story? Is the point of Jesus's stories that they point to the truth about you and me and our stories? We are the ones who have been mugged, and we are also the ones who pass by pretending we don't notice. Hard as it is to believe, maybe every once in a while we are even the ones who pay an arm and a leg to help. The truth of the story is not a motto suitable for framing. It is a truth that one way or another, God help us, we live out every day of our lives. It is a truth as complicated and sad as you and I ourselves are complicated and sad, and as joyous and as simple as we are too. The stories that Jesus tells are about us. Once upon a time is *our* time, in other words.

*Frederick Buechner*

## ONLINE SERMON SOURCES

Matthew 25:13 - Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour  
<http://www.katharinesmith.org.uk/common-worship-lectionary/year-a-sundays-before-advent/sermon-and-intercessions-for-the-third-sunday-before-advent-year-a/>

[The Cry At Midnight \(the Meaning Behind The Parable Of The 10 Bridesmaids\) by J Jeffrey Smead](#)

From an Anglican source

<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-cry-at-midnight-the-meaning-behind-the-parable-of-the-10-bridesmaids-j-jeffrey-smead-sermon-on-discipleship-161848.asp>



## **CHILDREN**

Scroll down for an outline on the Matthew passage

<http://worshipingwithchildren.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/year-proper-27-32nd-sunday-in-ordinary.html>

**Please commend this resource to colleagues - they simply send an email to [churchnewsireland@gmail.com](mailto:churchnewsireland@gmail.com) with the message 'Passwords' in the title**