

**Sermon for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost,
November 12, 2017**

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A, Proper 27: Amos 5:18–24; Psalm 70; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; Matthew 25:1–13

In the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus gives five sermons. All of them have acquired names. The first and the longest is the Sermon on the Mount.¹ Then there's a Mission Sermon,² a Sermon in Parables,³ and a Sermon on the Church.⁴

Today, and for the next two Sundays, the final Sundays of this church year, our gospel lessons are taken from the last and second longest of these.⁵ It has two names. I don't think I could tell you what either of the names were before I ended up in seminary. This last sermon is usually called either the "Apocalyptic Sermon"—"apocalyptic" referring to images, visions, of the end of the world—or the "Eschatological

¹ Matthew 5:1–7:29

² Matthew 10:1–42.

³ Matthew 13:1–52.

⁴ Matthew 18:1–35.

⁵ Matthew 24:1–25:46.

Sermon”—from the Greek for words about the “last” things.⁶

In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus has been in Jerusalem, but he’s not in this city at this point in time. On his first day, he had made a triumphal entry and had thrown out all who bought and sold in the precincts of the temple.

The second day he taught in the temple and engaged the religious leaders in the presence of the people. Jesus would not be entrapped by any of them. When I read this passage I sense anger and greater sadness. As he leaves the temple, Emmanuel declares, “Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate.”⁷ It’s all over. He will not enter the temple again. By the time the gospel according to Matthew is written, there will be no temple; it was torn down in the aftermath of the Great Revolt.

⁶ Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), *s.v.* “Apocalyptic Literature,” 69; “Eschatology,” 469–70.

⁷ Matthew 23:38.

Matthew and Luke both have Mark's gospel in front of them when they write. Each uses Mark for his own theological perspective.

As the Eschatological Sermon begins, Jesus has gone from the city to the Mount of Olives. He will return to the city to share the Passover meal with his disciples. The twelve follow him to the mount. They want to know when the temple will fall and “what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?”⁸

In Mark and Matthew, Jesus warns the disciples about “false Christs and false prophets.”⁹ He speaks of signs that the end of the world as we know it is near. In Matthew alone, we hear today's gospel lesson, the parable of the Ten Virgins—Ten Young Women—Ten Bridesmaids.¹⁰

First, something about marriage customs in first-century Israel. If I understand what I have read correctly, a bridegroom would go to the house of the bride to finalize, to sign, the marriage agreement he

⁸ Matthew 24:3.

⁹ Mark 13:22; Matthew 24:24.

¹⁰ Matthew 25:1–13.

had made with the young woman's father.¹¹ Then he would bring the bride to his house, accompanied by ten unmarried women carrying lighted torches. (There is a scholarly debate about whether to call them torches or lamps. I think the torches have it.)¹²

In this parable, the five foolish young women are away at a market to get more oil when the bridegroom (Christ) comes. When they reach the house of the wedding festival, they find the door shut. When they say, "Lord, Lord, open to us," the door remains shut. And the Lord says, "I do not know you."¹³

In this last sermon in Matthew, important, gracious words from the first sermon in Matthew are left behind, emptied of their meaning and of their hope. In that first sermon Jesus said, "Every one who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one knocking it will be opened."¹⁴ Please recall as well that in the sermon on the church, Jesus said to Peter that he should forgive his brother seventy times seven times, but in the example of this that he gave to Peter,

¹¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 228.

¹² *Ibid.*, 228–30.

¹³ Matthew 25:10–12.

¹⁴ Matthew 7:8. My translation.

a man who was shown great mercy, got it wrong one time, and was immediately jailed. Not even a second chance was given.¹⁵ A very hard Matthew, harder, I think, than Jesus.

New Testament scholar Ulrich Luz in his commentary on Matthew quotes the ending novelist Nikos Kazantzakis gives in his book *The Last Temptation of Christ* for the parable of the ten young women:
 “ ‘What would you have done, Nathanael,’ Jesus asked . . . ‘if you had been the bridegroom?’ Nathanael was silent . . . not entirely clear what he would have done . . . [then “in a low voice” he said] ‘I would have opened the door’ . . . [Jesus replied] ‘Congratulations, friend . . . This moment, though you are still alive, you enter paradise.’ ”¹⁶

In Mark and Matthew’s sermons on the last things, things, Jesus says, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.”¹⁷ Here some see a more human

¹⁵ Matthew 18:21–35.

¹⁶ Luz, 245.

¹⁷ Matthew 24:36; Mark 13:32.

Jesus emerge from Emmanuel.¹⁸ Luke and John's Jesus, I think, always knows.

Matthew worried that men and women would fall away from the obedience to God that God demanded. He feared that men and women would not recognize Christ in their sisters and brothers—for Matthew, that meant their fellow Christians. And if one couldn't see Christ in one's community, one was burying the gift that had been given and not using it for the mission of the kingdom of heaven.

I want to acknowledge that a week ago in Sutherland, Texas, around 11:30 AM Central time, a deranged man murdered and maimed, almost destroyed a church family. It's been hard for me to listen to the news. I've been in small churches many times. I don't want to see in my mind what the dying and the survivors heard and saw. I don't want to bring to mind the carnage that first responders and forensic teams had to see. The man was court martialed for domestic violence and other offenses while serving in the Air Force. He served a year in prison and received a dishonorable discharge. The FBI should have been notified but

¹⁸ Luz, 213–14.

wasn't. He was working as an unarmed security guard a week before the massacre, but it seems he was already armed.¹⁹

I don't think Jesus had this or anything like it in mind when he lived and taught. But Jesus did know of, to use our Prayer Book's words, "the shortness and uncertainty of human life."²⁰

I tend to try to live on the side of Matthew's Jesus when he is living out his admonition to a group of Pharisees, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."²¹ I know who I am: I am a believer; I am a sinner; I believe at the last Jesus will be my judge; and I am a person who trusts in the mercy of God.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/texas-shooter-had-escaped-from-mental-hospital-1510089170>, (accessed 12 November 2017).

²⁰ 504.

²¹ Matthew 9:13.