

Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

December 1, 2019

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year A: Isaiah 2:1–5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:8–14; Matthew 24:36–44*

Last Sunday, the Feast of Christ the King, as preacher I had a choice of gospel lessons. I chose to preach on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in Luke. I'm sure everyone who heard me knew the rest of that story. In Lent this year, I figured out—after all these years—that the Parable of the Prodigal Son doesn't stand alone—it's the concluding story of Jesus speaking to a group of Pharisees. The group is judging Jesus about being among sinners and eating with them. Jesus then speaks first of a lost sheep, then of a lost coin, finally of a lost child.¹ So since the end of March, when I look at a gospel lesson, I try to make sure that the appointed lesson doesn't obscure the evangelist's purpose in retelling a story about Jesus. So this morning I'm going to begin where today's gospel lesson begins.

Jesus is in Jerusalem. It's two days before the Passover. It's evening. Jesus has again gone, as he has every night since coming to Jerusalem, to the Mount of Olives. He's there with the twelve. He speaks about the destruction of the temple and about the end of time—

¹ Luke 15:1–32.

and on first glance, that seems to be what today's gospel is about. But Jesus goes on and gives his words a larger meaning.

First, I want to talk very briefly about Jesus not knowing what his Father knows and less briefly about the meaning of the word *parousía*.

The evangelist's words of Jesus saying, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father," became problematic in the centuries when Christians had great battles about how to speak of the Trinity.² Some otherwise good copyists dealt with the problem by simply omitting them. Following the practice of the Roman Catholic Church, our 1979 Prayer Book Lectionary omitted this verse—remember we have permission to read more, not less, than the passage appointed. To give credit to the new lectionary (of which I am not a fan), this verse is appointed always to be read. My sense is that today, most Christians can be comfortable with these words by seeing them as one way Mark and Matthew tried to proclaim Jesus' was completely human.³

² François Bovon, *Luke 3: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28–24:53*, trans. James Crouch, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 214–15.

³ *Ibid.*, 214.

If you look it up in a good dictionary, you will find “Parousia,” with a capital “P,” meaning “the Coming of Christ on Judgment Day.”⁴ The words’ primary meaning is in Greek is simply “presence.”⁵ So, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son . . . As were the days of Noah, so will be the ‘presence’ of the Son of man.”

In the days of Noah, God seemed absent, not to matter to humankind, not active. But God was present in God’s own way—as God has always been really present to humankind since the days of humankind on this earth.

So, Jesus said to his disciples, “Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour.”⁶ Fair enough. But the evangelist goes on. Jesus’ next words are about a slave, whom a master puts in charge while the master is away.⁷ The slave with authority is cruel. Jesus says, “the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in

⁴ *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, unabridged ed. (New York: Random House, 1967), s.v. “Parousia,” 1950.

⁵ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “παρουσία,” 780–81.

⁶ Matthew 24:44. NRSV

⁷ Matthew 24:45–51. NRSV

pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”⁸

Jesus isn’t finished. He continues with the parable of the five wise bridesmaids who took the time to prepare and, thus, had oil for their lamps, and five who did not prepare in time, and were late for the feast. The ones who were late say to their lord, “Master, master, open to us.”⁹ They hear their master reply, “I do not know you.”¹⁰ The door remains shut.

Two more stories. First, the Parable of the Talents¹¹—that is, money. The master gives money to three servants, according to their abilities. Two use the money to make more money for their master. The third hides the money so he can be sure of being able to return it. The third is cast out to the place where “men weep and grind their teeth.”¹²

On the Sunday next before Advent 2020, we will hear the evangelist’s conclusion of today’s gospel lesson. I don’t think I need to read the whole parable, just what

⁸ Matthew 24:50–51. NRSV.

⁹ Matthew 25:11. My translation.

¹⁰ Matthew 25:12. NRSV.

¹¹ Matthew 25:14–30.

¹² Matthew 25:30. My translation.

God wants us always to remember, God's words for God's people: " 'Come . . . inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world . . . I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.'¹³ I think *parousía* is not about the end of the world but about all of us human beings today.

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

Copyright © 2019 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.

¹³ See Matthew 25:31–46. My translation after the NRSV.