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A Commentary Companion to the Lectionary Readings NOVEMBER 2005

November 6, 2005

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Psalm 78:1-7
 or Amos 5:18-24
Psalm 70
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

November 13, 2005

Judges 4:1-7
Psalm 123
 or Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18
Psalm 90:1-8, (9-11), 12
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

November 20, 2005

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24
Psalm 100
Psalm 95:1-7a
Ephesians 1:15-23
Matthew 25:31-46

November 27, 2005

Isaiah 64:1-9
Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
1 Corinthians 1:3-9
Mark 13:24-37

In October's lectionary readings, we read about the failings of human authority and the reliability of divine authority. In November's readings, this theme is developed as the nature of God's power is explored. If we can find hope in God to counter human failings (Psalm 70, Psalm 78, Psalm 123, Psalm 95:1-7a), we can also find fear in God, because God judges those same human failings that we seek to be rescued from (Joshua 24, Judges 4, Amos 5, Zephaniah 1, Psalm 90, Psalm 80). This tension between hope and fear drives one of the central concerns of Biblical theology: In the final analysis, will we experience God's power as mercy or as judgment, as love or as anger? Will we ultimately dwell in light or in darkness?

This concern colors New Testament teachings about the Church. Last month, we read about a Church subjected to false teachers as well as blessed with true teachers; this month, we encounter a Church composed of both true and false disciples. The parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids dramatically illustrates the seriousness of this predicament: "*The bridesmaids* represent the church, the present *corpus mixtum* that will be sorted out at the parousia."¹ Similarly, in the parable of the talents, all of the servants receive a portion of their master's wealth—representing the Word of God—but only at their master's return are their responses judged to be faithful or not. Finally, in the parable of the goats and the sheep, the distinction between true and false disciples is also revealed at a time when it is, in a sense, *too late* for the knowledge to do them any good.

The inevitable existential uncertainty for us as believers thus takes the form of a single pressing question: how do we know whether we are true or false disciples? Or: how do we please God? "Between the righteous and the wicked there is no apparent difference,"² noted one ancient commentator. Goats in the ancient Near East were very like sheep in appearance and behavior; the servants were very like each other in their desire to be proper stewards; the

bridesmaids were very like each other in their desire to see the groom. The only distinguishing feature between the wise and the foolish in these parables, the pleasing and the unpleasing, is that the wise forged ahead while the foolish adopted more of a “wait and see” attitude: “What matters is being ready; being prepared; being wise; thinking ahead, realizing that a crisis is coming sooner or later and that if you don’t make preparations now, and keep them in good shape in the meantime, you’ll wish you had.”³

At this point, for most of us, our existential uncertainty is not exactly relieved. Foresight, wisdom and steadfastness are not personal qualities that most of us have unreserved confidence about in ourselves, after all; if they comprise God’s “test” for us, we are not confident of passing. However, we have to remember above all else that the Good News of Jesus is, in fact, good news: “This setting means that any sense of a ‘final examination’ is placed within a larger context, in which the grace and love of God are overflowing at every point.”⁴ In other words—for example, in Paul’s comments in 1 Thessalonians 4 on the fate of believers who have died before Jesus’ return—the “purpose here is not speculation, but comfort... There will be grief, of course; but there is also hope. There will come a day when God will put all wrongs to rights, when all grief will turn to joy.”⁵

But *how* will God put our own personal wrongs to rights? The promise of Scripture is that God gives us the indwelling Holy Spirit who transforms us more and more into the likeness of Christ, who we know is pleasing to God even when we are not so sure that *we* are. A true disciple, then, is one with the Spirit, so that when we show the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (cf. Galations 5:22-23)—we are given evidence of God’s mercy in our lives. In other words, it is God’s merciful grace that makes us fit for God’s mercy. To use Augustine’s metaphor: “We can put oil into our lamps, but we ourselves cannot create the olive.”⁶ The message that it is the Spirit that opens our eyes to the power of God is at the heart of Ephesians 1: “God’s Spirit is the source of all wisdom and knowledge among the elect.”⁷ In a very real sense, God must restore us to relationship with God before we can even think of repenting—the reverse of how we normally think of “the plan of salvation.”

Given the importance of this anticipatory restoration coming before repentance, it is important that the parables in this month’s readings not be taken as expressions of systematic theology. Instead, they serve as both a warning and an inspiration for believers, “the elect,” the

Church. We are not to let the apparent state of the world, and our place in it, distract us from the real state of the world and our place in it. As Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 5 say to us, "here you are in the middle of the world's night—but the spirit of Jesus within you is telling you it's already daytime. You are already children of the day, children of light... You are wide awake long before the full sunrise has dawned."⁸

Since we are awake even though the world still sleeps, we are meant to act accordingly. This obligation applies not only to individuals, but to societies as well. The imagery of the divine shepherd in Ezekiel makes precisely this point: "How a society and its leaders treat those who struggle against disadvantages speaks volumes about that society's true values—not the ones it professes to hold, but those revealed in policy and action."⁹ As Jesus taught, one can judge a tree by the fruit that it bears. When we examine our own fruit, we more often than not see as many negative qualities as positive ones; if we are lucky, the Spirit convicts us and enables us to face our shortcomings honestly. This honesty is critically important, because as the prophet teaches in Isaiah: "Confession...clears the way for the people to cast themselves upon God's mercy."¹⁰

What form does this mercy take? As we draw near to the season of Advent and Christmas, we remember the plea that has echoed through the ages: "O come, o come, Emmanuel!" This hope finds strong expression in Isaiah, where the prophet foresees deliverance coming not through new or better teaching, but by the return of the actual presence of God among the people (as in the Exodus story): "God is reminded...how God had once made known, not only the divine word through the prophets, but God's own self, without remainder."¹¹

This image of hope actually has two aspects. The first is the presence of God among God's people; the second is the identity of God's people as a community in the first place. It is important to remember that the Biblical picture of salvation is overwhelmingly a picture of community. Christians today are used to thinking of salvation as something that happens to individuals, practically in isolation. This model not only diminishes the Biblical witness, but encourages many contemporary Christians to divide humanity into saved and lost individuals, with very problematic social and ethical consequences. In this setting, we would do well to take a closer look at the "little apocalypse" of Mark, which features no punishment of the wicked: "Readers are not encouraged to speculate about the fate of their enemies."¹²

Indeed, to linger on the fate of any who disappoint God or any limits to God’s mercy is to diminish the glory of what God has done in Christ: “The risen Christ is exalted above all the powers in the universe...Christ is head of a body that fills the entire cosmos...that creative power of God to touch, be embedded in, or linked to every single part of the universe.”¹³ In such a universe, who are we to think that the undeniable power of humans to disappoint God (and each other) could be stronger than God’s power to overcome and transform disappointment? In the final analysis, trust in God’s ultimate mercy is grounded as much in awe as in hope: a God who creates, redeems and sustains the world—and calls it good—will surely succeed at restoring the goodness of the world, including ourselves. God will make God’s people wise, responsible and loving in order to fulfill the purpose of the world, rendering any final judgment simply another step of the process of redemption that began with the ministry of Jesus. This assurance is why, in 1 Corinthians, “Paul couldn’t stop talking about Jesus...And what he wants the Corinthians to get hold of most of all is what it means to have Jesus at the middle of your story, your life, your thoughts, your imagination. If they can do that, all the other issues that rush to and fro...will sort themselves out.”¹⁴ Will we ultimately dwell in darkness or in light? The answer is that it is less important *where* we dwell than *with whom*: we will ultimately dwell with Jesus, the image of God’s love and mercy.

¹ M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 8 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1995), 450.

² Author of “Incomplete Work on Matthew,” in *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, c2002), 231.

³ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two: Chapters 16-28* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2002), 133-134.

⁴ Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, 138.

⁵ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2002), 126.

⁶ Augustine, in *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, c2002), 216.

⁷ Perkins, “Ephesians,” 381.

⁸ Wright, *Galatians and Thessalonians*, 128.

⁹ Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, “The Book of Ezekiel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 6 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c2001), 1467.

¹⁰ Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, c1995), 239-240.

¹¹ Christopher R. Seitz, “The Book of Isaiah 40-66: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 6 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c2001), 529.

¹² PHEME PERKINS, “The Gospel of Mark: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 8 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, c1995), 692.

¹³ Perkins, “Ephesians,” 386-387.

¹⁴ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, c2004, 2003), 2.