

Pentecost 23, November 8, 2020 (Mt 25:1-13; Amos 5:18-24; 1 Thess 4:13-18; Ps 70)

What on earth does God want? Let's ask Amos, unwilling prophet in the eighth century before Christ. God called him to speak the truth to Jeroboam II, King of Israel. The nation was thriving as never before! And never again would the land achieve such power and prosperity.

Many Israelites back then believed their military superiority and national wealth were signs of the Lord's special favor. They felt they'd *earned* this favor by extravagantly supporting the official shrines in the land--the shrines dedicated to "all the other gods."

But God was *not* pleased by their way of life. He sent Amos to denounce Israel's rulers for relying on *military might* instead of on *him*; for *unjust social dealings*; and for *shallow, meaningless religious practices*.

The people of Israel were clamoring for "the day of the Lord" to come. They believed that on that day, God would show up as the supreme victor. He would prove his claims as the almighty Lord of the whole earth, and Israel—God's chosen nation—would be exalted before all their opponents. So the Israelites were eager for that day of vindication to arrive.

Amos challenged their arrogance. **Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light**, he proclaimed, like fleeing from a lion and running into a bear. Or returning home exhausted and leaning against the wall, only to be bitten by a snake. This day of the Lord you crave will be pitch-dark for you, **without a ray of brightness**.

Then he spoke God's words to them: **I hate, I despise your religious festivals. I can't stand your assemblies. I won't accept your offerings of grain and meat. I hate the noise of your songs! I won't listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream!**

With those words God rejected the practice of religion in Israel. There was nothing wrong with gathering to worship, with sacrificial offerings, with music—these aspects of worship were fine.

It was the worshipers themselves who were displeasing to God, because their every-day lives were so contrary to God's will. When they went through the motions of praise and sacrifice, their hearts were far away from the holiness of God, the holy obedience he expected from those he'd blessed so richly. *True worship of God*, said Amos, would be **to practice justice and righteousness in all things**. Especially in our relationships.

Pentecost 23, 2020, p. 2

How about us? Are we looking forward to the day of the Lord? We say it every time we worship: Jesus Christ, our Lord, **will come again to judge the living and the dead.**

After today there are only two more readings from Matthew, year A of the cycle of readings. The first Sunday of Advent, November 29, welcomes the gospel of Mark, the primary gospel for 2021.

Matthew ends his gospel with warnings, which we heard in October's readings, and with parables of judgment, beginning today.

The earliest Christians were faced with a problem. They'd expected Jesus to "come again," to return to *judge the living and the dead*, within their lifetime. By the time Matthew's gospel was written some 50 years after the resurrection, it was becoming clear they'd need to rethink how they should live in the meantime.

They began to ask, "What shall we do while we wait for Christ to come again?" The answer is, *be prepared*, because there will be *some* kind of judgment, some "sorting" at the end. Hence today's gospel parable.

There are ten bridesmaids—presumed to be virgins—waiting for the bridegroom to appear. It's after midnight when he arrives, and five of the attendants realize they don't have enough oil to keep their lamps burning. They're *unprepared*. And in the end, that costs them the wedding banquet.

Two thousand years later, we're still waiting. Unlike the ten bridesmaids, most of us don't even have *lamps*, let alone extra oil. We recognize the wedding as the kingdom of God. Christ is the bridegroom. We, the believers, are the bridesmaids—sorry, guys! I guess you can be the groomsmen. Some are prepared, some are not.

Steve Garnaas-Holmes interprets this parable very differently than most theologians. I quote his *Unfolding Light* from November 7, 2017: *Jesus tells a story: bridesmaids await a groom who is delayed. Some run out of oil. The others won't give up their oil, so those who are short go out to buy more, and when the groom comes, they're off at the hardware store. They return to the party too late to be admitted.*

Pentecost 23, 2020, p. 3

*We think the maidens are “foolish” because they didn’t plan for the groom’s long delay (as if that’s a spiritual issue). And we suppose they had no choice but to dash off to get oil, and therefore, sadly, they miss the groom. But is that really the point? Were they really just the lighting crew? Does it occur to them (or us) that maybe they could just run out of oil, and the groom will be glad to see them anyway because he’d rather have their company than their flashlights? Their purpose is to **meet the groom**—but right when he needs them most, they’re off taking care of their own worries. They aren’t there for him.*

*But they’re not alone. Everybody in the story fails to be there for each other. The “wise” maidens could have shared. It wouldn’t have killed them. But they make their sisters go shopping at midnight—and are happy to go to the party without them. They’re not willing to be there for the others.*

*And the groom—in what way is he not a jerk? He won’t let his friends come to the party because they’re **late**? After he himself has made them wait halfway through the night? And on top of that he insults them, saying, “I don’t know you!” He vaporizes his friendship over **tardiness**? Wow. What a prince of selfishness.*

*So what’s Jesus up to in this story? I think he’s setting us up. We’re so anxious to “get” the story, to believe something pious about it, to judge between wise and foolish, we miss the actual relationships, like the maidens out buying oil instead of just being there. Sometimes we’re obsessed with our lamps instead of with each other. It really doesn’t matter what we think, or how much oil we have in our lamps, or how well others meet our expectations. What matters is that we’re there for each other.*

*Pray that you might run out of oil, having **given it away** to be there for someone in need. Trust that the Bridegroom will be happy for you to be there. (end of quote)*

I like that “happy ending”! I like to be reminded that Jesus came to heal the sick, and not those who are already healthy; that there’s nothing we can do to earn our salvation, because it’s a gift from God; that, just as the Trinity is the divine relationship among Father-Son-Holy Spirit, each person of the Trinity desires to have an intimate, ongoing relationship with each of *us*. God is always *for* us, never against us!

And I love it when I find a “new” insight into a scripture that hasn’t really made sense to me before. Steve G-H often enlightens me, and I’m grateful. Grateful here to be reminded that in the midst of our questioning, *surrounding* our questioning, we always have Jesus’ words of empowering love and forgiveness:

Pentecost 23, 2020, p. 4

**Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Mt. 11:28-30).**

**For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him may not *perish*, but may have everlasting life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to *condemn* the world, but that the world—the whole world—might be saved through him (Jo 3:16-17).**

Thanks be to God!