

Pentecost 23 / November 8, 2020

Matthew 25:13

“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Do you wonder when the end will come? Do you ever worry the end might come when you are in the middle of a good book, a real cliff hanger? Do you eat dessert first, just in case? Do you really want the end to come? Sure, when I’m 106 and on my last breath. Even more certainly than we know the Lord will come, we know our lives will come to an end; and we do everything in our power to push that day as far into the future as possible. In Revelation, the Spirit and the Church cry, ‘Come Lord Jesus.’ Nevertheless, there’s a part of us that whispers, ‘but not too soon.’ Whether it’s the end of the world, or the end of our lives in the world, we wonder when it will come. Part of us hopes the end doesn’t come too soon. But, whenever it comes or whenever we go, we hope we will be ready.

Our text is a parable about being ready and only about being ready! It’s obviously not about sharing. When the virgins who run out of oil ask their comrades to share, the others tell them to take a hike and buy more oil for themselves. There are parables about sharing. The chapter ends with a parable of the judgement, in which Jesus blesses those who expressed their faith, by sharing their resources with others. He says, “Whatever you did for the least of these my brothers, you did for me.”

It’s not a parable about forgiveness. When the door is closed it stays closed! There are parables about forgiveness. In the parable of the loving father, the wayward son is welcomed home with open arms, even before he says he is sorry. Parables are almost always about one thing. This is a parable about one thing: being ready for the return of Christ, the judgement and the renewal of all things!

Are you the kind of person who is always ready? Have you ever said, “Is that today?” Even worse, have you ever said, “Was that yesterday?” How do you ensure you are ready for appointments, anniversaries and deadlines? April 30th is the deadline for filing income tax returns without penalty. April 30th is one of the busiest days for filing tax returns. Everyone knows the day. It’s been the same day for decades, but it just creeps up on us and suddenly it’s May 1st. If you owe tax and miss the deadline, there will be a day of reckoning and a price to pay.

This is a parable about being ready for the greatest day of reckoning at the return of Christ. We make ourselves ready for that day by treasuring Him in our hearts as Saviour. He has paid the price! We watch for that day by seeking Him in the scriptures, seeing Him in our fellowship as believers and receiving His grace in the sacrament of His holy body and precious blood. We watch for that day by fixing our eyes on Jesus. When our eyes are fixed on Jesus, we are always ready: Ready to be called more fully into His presence at the end of our faith journey. Ready to greet Him when He returns as Lord and King of all.

Ever since Jesus spoke His promise to return and said “watch,” people have wondered when He will return. Even though He said, “no one knows the day or the hour,” people always try to figure it out. As the new millennium approached there was an avalanche of predictions and the expectation that the year 2000 would be the year. People thought maybe January 1st would be the day, or the second, then the third, or maybe December 31st. In retrospect, the year 2000 would have been a little too obvious. People also didn’t realize that our calendar isn’t exactly calibrated to the year of Jesus’ birth. It’s off by as many as seven years. From that perspective the year 2000 was in 1993! How’s that for irony! The two thousandth anniversary of Jesus’ birth came and went and no one was watching!

We don’t make ourselves ready by watching the calendar and by hypothesizing significant dates. Jesus said there will be signs in the heavens and on the earth, to keep us watchful. He said there will be earthquakes and that stars would fall from the sky. He said there will be wars and rumours of wars. But lest we are deceived by our predictive skills, He said, “These are but the beginning of the birth pangs.” We don’t make ourselves ready by sensing the nearness of the day through the signs of the times, by reading the morning news, or by watching the stars. These are signs to remind us of Jesus’ promise to return. We watch and make ourselves ready, by holding Him in our hearts through faith and by faithfully following Him, bearing our crosses, using our talents to His glory, fulfilling the responsibilities He has given us and extending His righteous reign, by sharing the gospel of forgiveness with others.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus said the coming of the Son of Man is “like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home, he puts his servants in charge, each with his work.” We watch for Jesus’ return by doing the work that He has given us. What work has Jesus given you? The first work Jesus gives us is to care for our families. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for using their vows to God, as a means to escape their responsibilities to their families. The second work Jesus gives us is to the church, which is the family of God. We watch by maintaining our fellowship with believers, gathering together for worship, prayer, study and conversation, as best we can in any given circumstance. We watch by fulfilling our responsibilities to our community and country. In the prophecy of Jeremiah, the Lord told the Judean exiles in Babylon to “Seek the welfare of the city into which I have sent you into exile.” In his first letter to Timothy, St Paul wrote: “I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high places.”

The parable of the virgins is about being ready. The parable at the end of the chapter shows the many ways in which believers watched for Jesus’ return, by being faithful to their tasks. At the last judgement, Jesus will say to those blessed by His Father, “I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me.” The faithful did all these things not on the basis of their will power, virtue or moral stamina. They did these things, because they treasured Jesus in their hearts as Saviour and followed Him as Lord.

Jesus was their life and Jesus was at the heart of their lives. The day of Jesus’ return didn’t take them by surprise, because they walked with Jesus every day. They focused on the tasks He had given them and one day they looked up and He was there. The day of His coming or the day of our coming to Him, may surprise us in its suddenness, but it won’t take us by surprise when we listen to Him in His word, speak with Him in our prayers, seek Him in our worship, share with Him in our fellowship, see Him in the sacrament of Holy Communion and remember His promises spoken to us in our baptism. One day we will look up and He will be there. He is with us always. We will just see Him more clearly!

The parable tells us to be ready and to watch, but it doesn’t tell us how to watch, or what it is that makes us ready. There are lamps and oil in the parable. The foolish virgins ran out of oil and couldn’t light their lamps when the time came. The wise virgins carried an extra flask, just in case there was a delay. When the groom arrived at an unexpected hour their lamps were ready for lighting. What do we need to keep our lamps burning? There is a song called, “Give me oil in my lamp.” It asks Jesus to give us the things necessary to keep our lamps burning, so we are ready to welcome Him at His return as King and Lord. The parable is about watching and being ready, but we are never told what the oil is. What is the oil? The oil is everything that holds Jesus in our hearts as Saviour.

The oil is everything which encourages our faith and everything that inspires us to express our faith in kindness. The oil is everything that empowers us to share our faith, by telling others the good news about Jesus the Saviour. The oil is our mutual conversation as Christians, our worship together, the prayers we share and everything that is part of our fellowship as members of the body of Christ. The oil is the word of the gospel, by which the Spirit breathes faith into our hearts. The oil is the water of our baptism, by which the Spirit daily drowns our sins and refreshes us with newness of life in Christ. The oil is Christ’s body and blood, through which we receive the forgiveness of sin, the Holy Spirit and a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb and the church. In all these ways and through all these means, Jesus keeps us watchful and gives us oil to keep our lamps burning, so we are always ready to be received by Him when our lives in the world come to an end, or when He returns as King and Lord of all.

May Jesus be the oil in our lamps and keep our faith burning, until we see Him in the light of the eternal day. In His Name. Amen