



Lessons in Eschatology

The final weeks of Ordinary Time

AMY EKEH

NOVEMBER 5

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 23:1-12

REFLECT: In October’s readings from the Gospel of Matthew, we read about increasing tension between Jesus and the religious leaders. With parables and strong words, Jesus told the religious leaders that they had failed to recognize God’s kingdom breaking into the world.

In today’s Gospel Jesus continues his criticism of the religious leaders, this time speaking to the crowds and focusing on one fatal flaw of the scribes and Pharisees: hypocrisy. This common flaw is part of being human, but among the leaders of the people, Jesus finds it especially pervasive and detestable.

Jesus remarks that these leaders claim teaching authority but do not even practice what they themselves teach. They burden the people but do not share the burden. On top of this they crave adulation, honor, deference, and greatness. They exalt themselves.

Although there were certainly good, humble, and honest men among the Jewish religious leadership in the time of Jesus, it is clear that Jesus was disappointed in Israel’s leaders as a whole. Jesus’ own life of humility, compassion, and self-giving stood in direct opposition to the shallow values he saw among the men

that became first his critics and then his enemies.

We can imagine Jesus looking at the people of God — the Israelites — with love and empathy. Their leaders had failed to guide them in the ways of gentleness, humility, and love. Their leaders had failed to guide



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them in the ways of God. This is why Jesus told the people that they should no longer call anyone teacher, father, or master. Instead he boldly declared: “You have but one master, the Christ.”

It is not that Jesus wanted the religious leaders to be

condemned or demoralized. But he wanted them to wake up to the ways of God, the ways of the kingdom. Jesus himself, by word and deed, showed the way to do this. Jesus was humble: “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Matthew 11:29). He shared the burdens of his people: “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). And even when it cost him his life, he practiced what he preached: “The greatest among you must be your servant” (Matthew 23:11).

ASK YOURSELF: In what way am I a “religious leader” in my community? Have I considered the responsibility that I have in catechetical ministry to practice what I preach? Am I sharing the burdens of those I serve?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: Jesus was very critical of the religious leaders of his time. Do you think he loved them? Why do you think his words were especially harsh toward this group of people? What responsibility did they have that they failed to carry out?

PRAY: Jesus, you hated hypocrisy. Help me to clearly see and root out the hypocrisy in my own life. May I always follow your example of humility and service.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: This week find a few small ways to exercise humility and quietly share the burdens of others. Perform a task you normally would not do, or do something for someone but remain anonymous. Reflect on these small acts and consider how *intentional humility* can be a part of your every day life.

NOVEMBER 12

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 25:1-13

Reflect: In this Sunday’s Gospel reading, we skip forward a few chapters in Matthew’s Gospel into the middle of what scholars call Jesus’ *eschatological discourse*. You may recall that there are five major discourses (or thematic collections of Jesus’ sayings) in the Gospel of Matthew. These are the Sermon on the Mount (5–7), the Missionary Discourse (10), the Parables of the Kingdom of God (13), the Discourse on the Church (18), and the Eschatological Discourse (24–25).

Matthew 25 is a collection of three major parables with eschatological themes. The word *eschatology* derives from the Greek word *eskhatos* meaning “last.” Eschatology is the study of the “last things,” traditionally categorized as death, judgment, heaven, and hell.

Eschatology explores

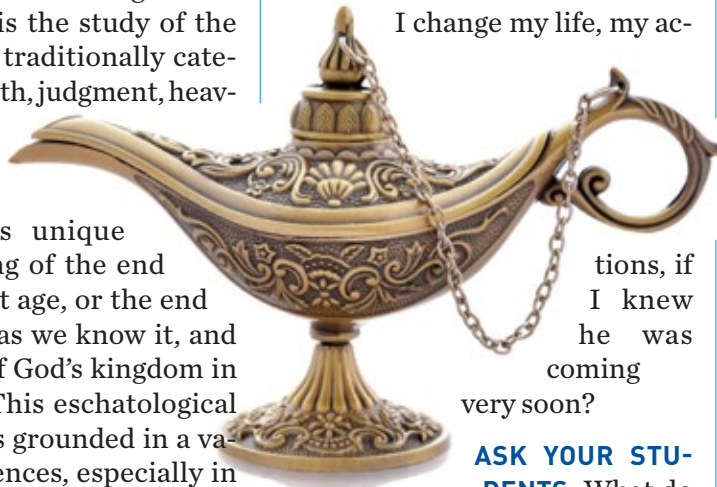
Christianity’s unique understanding of the end of the present age, or the end of the world as we know it, and the coming of God’s kingdom in its fullness. This eschatological perspective is grounded in a variety of influences, especially in Christianity’s Jewish roots and in the words of Jesus himself. These three parables (which we will read for the three remaining Sundays in November) will explore some themes and ideas pertaining to the end of the age.

Today’s parable of the 10 virgins, or 10 maidens, is a parable about watchfulness and readiness for the end of the age. The

key event of this end time is the return of the Son of Man, clearly identified with Jesus. When Jesus — the bridegroom — returns, some will be ready for him, and some will not. Those who are prepared will enter into his kingdom with him. Those who are not prepared will find the door closed. In fact, the bridegroom will say to them, “I do not know you” (Matthew 25:12).

Jesus does not always explain his parables, but in this case he does. He ends with a clear “moral” or message: “Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matthew 25:13). The end times may seem far away, but we are to live in watchful readiness for the return of the bridegroom and the fullness of God’s kingdom.

ASK YOURSELF: Am I ready for the return of Jesus? How would I change my life, my ac-



tions, if I knew he was coming very soon?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: What do you think it means to “watch” for the return of Jesus? What does it mean to be prepared, like the five wise maidens who had enough oil for their lamps?

PRAY: Jesus our bridegroom, wake us when we grow drowsy and fall asleep so we may rise up, trim our lamps, and come out to meet you.

MONTH SUMMARY**NOVEMBER 5**

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 23:1-12

Jesus criticizes the religious leaders for hypocrisy, vanity, and self-exaltation.

NOVEMBER 12

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus tells a parable about being watchful and ready while we await his return.

NOVEMBER 19

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus tells a parable about the responsibility to bear fruit in our lives while we await his return.

NOVEMBER 26

Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus describes a judgment scene in which he — as king — will judge people based on how well they showed love to one another and to him.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: What kinds of things would Jesus expect you to be doing upon his return? What is the oil you might need for your lamp — prayer, service, repentance? Identify the thing that has prevented you from filling your lamp to the brim, and make some positive movement toward being ready for Jesus by doing that thing this week.

NOVEMBER 19

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 25:14-30

REFLECT: The second parable in Matthew 25 is known as the parable of the talents. This is certainly one of those parables that should send a chill down the spine of every single one of us! We might imagine Jesus the preacher constructing this detailed story in his mind as he prepared to teach the people. As we know, Jesus did not flinch from telling the truth or prodding his listeners forward in their understanding of God’s love and expectations.

This familiar story tells of a master and three of his servants. Going away on a journey, the master entrusts his money to his servants before leaving. He divides the money unevenly, giving five talents (a very large sum of money) to the first servant, two talents to the second, and only one talent to the last. As the parable continues, we come to understand that the master intended the servants not only to keep the money safe, but to invest it. The money was meant to increase while the master was away.

The first two servants succeed in this endeavor. Both of them make profitable trades, thus doubling their funds. But the last servant does not do so well. Afraid of the master and his expectations, this servant “dug a hole in the ground and buried his master’s money” (Matthew 25:18).

The first two servants are commended by the returning master, who pledges his trust in them by promising them further responsibility and inviting them to “share [their] master’s joy” (verse 21). But the master is

surprisingly harsh with the last servant, the one who hid his single talent. As he hands the talent back to his master, he admits that he hid the talent out of fear. The master does not mince words or hide his displeasure. He calls this



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servant “wicked and lazy” (verse 26). He asks why he did not even make a minimal effort to grow the money. He orders the money taken from him and given to the first servant. He then orders the last servant to be thrown “into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth” (Matthew 25:30).

The reaction of the master to this fearful servant, as told by Jesus, may seem excessively severe. But that is exactly the point. An effective preacher, Jesus hammers home his message with the deft use of hyperbole (exaggeration). There is no room for fear in the kingdom of God. There is no place for excuses or inaction. There are expectations for

growth, change, and bearing fruit. There are expectations for putting everything we have to work for the master and his purposes.

Those who succeed, who bear fruit with what they have been given, will be given even more. The greatest gift of all is the promise of the master: “Come, share my joy” (Matthew 25:23).

NOTE: Although this parable is not about “talent” in the sense of personal abilities, you may be interested to know that the modern use of the word talent as an ability does derive from this well-known parable. The fact that some servants performed better than others ultimately became associated with the word for the money they managed (the “talent”).

ASK YOURSELF: What is Jesus expecting of me while he is “away”? What has he given me — time, talent, treasure — that is meant to bear fruit in this world? Am I willing to take risks to do this?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: Why do you think the master is so harsh with the final servant? What did he want the servant to do? Do you think God wants us to take risks? What kind of risks?

PRAY: Jesus, your stories help me examine my life, just as they did for those who heard you 2,000 years ago. May your words penetrate my heart and change me.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: Identify something you feel Jesus is calling you to do but you have hesitated to do. What is holding you back? Are you afraid you will fail? According to this parable, doing nothing is unacceptable in God’s kingdom. Ask God for strength to do what he asks of you, and then take a step forward.

NOVEMBER 26

Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

Matthew 25:31-46

REFLECT: This Sunday we celebrate the feast of Christ the King, which is the last Sunday in the liturgical year (Year A). Next Sunday is the First Sunday in Advent, and a new liturgical year will begin. In Year B, we will be reading mostly from the Gospel of Mark, so this Sunday concludes our time spent with Matthew's Gospel.

Our Gospel reading from Matthew takes up where last week's reading left off. Here we have the third in a series of eschatological (focusing on the end times) parables. The previous two parables were about watching and being ready for the return of Jesus. In this week's parable, we see a dramatic scene — a king is judging the nations, separating “sheep” from “goats.”

First, it should be mentioned that some commentators do not consider this Gospel passage to be a parable in the classic sense. While it is a narrative that contains a message (the word *parable* essentially means “allegory”), it is perhaps more accurately described as an eschatological judgment scene. It is an envisioning of the judgment of the nations by Christ himself.

Of course the most striking and ingenious thing about this judgment scene is the criteria by which the king is judging the people. What are the king's expectations? How are we supposed to act as we wait for his return, watchful and ready? Recalling the images from the previous two parables, what oil must we put

in our lamps? What must we do with the gifts and responsibilities the master has given us?

The answer is simple. There is only one way to ensure that there will always be oil in our lamps and that we will continuously bear fruit as we wait for the return of the master: In his absence, we must love one another. And, as the king explains, it is in loving one another — especially



those among us who are most in need — that *we make him present* (“you did it for me”). If, by loving another, we are also showing love to him, then even as we wait and watch for his return, the king already reigns among us.

ASK YOURSELF: How do I feed the hungry in my life? How do I help to satisfy the thirst of those who are looking for something more? Do I welcome strangers? Do I help to clothe those who have

lost their dignity or who feel embarrassed? Do I visit strangers — those in prison, or those who feel imprisoned by loneliness or pain?

ASK YOUR STUDENTS: Jesus said that whenever we do something to help someone, we are doing it for him: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink” (Matthew 25:35). Can you explain what Jesus meant in your own words? Who can you help?

PRAY: Christ my King, may I serve you in every person who comes into my life.

LIVE THE GOSPEL: This passage from Matthew 25 lists what we now call the “corporal works of mercy” (along with burying the dead). This week, choose one of these works of mercy to live out in some concrete way: Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick, or visit the imprisoned. Keep in mind that you may not even need to go beyond the walls of your own home to do these things. And there, in the one you serve and love, you will find Christ the King.

NOTE TO READERS: Look for more reflections for The Sunday Gospel for December 2017 at Catechist.com/SundayGospelDec2017. Reflections for both November and December will be made available via downloadable PDF formats.



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