

Pentecost XXVI (Proper 27a)
 Am 5.18-24; 1 Th 4.13-18; Mt 25.1-13
 9 November 2008
 Fr. Patrick S. Allen

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Yesterday morning at Pantry, a few of us engaged in some seasonal lamenting – the Curate, as ever, being lamenter-in-chief – concerning the display of Christmas goods in retail outlets earlier and earlier into the Fall. So early, I am told, that young Jack Crawford observed a couple weeks ago a Christmas tree festooned with jack-o-lanterns. His tender sensibilities formed here at the Church of the Holy Communion were, you may be sure, appropriately offended. ⁱ

We may lament the retail encroachment of the Christmas consumption season all the way in to October, but in this morning's lessons, we get a little ahead of ourselves as well. Amos warns of the great and terrible day of the Lord. Paul consoles us with the archangel's cry and the last trump and the resurrection of the dead. And our Lord gives us more of the same with a parable about a coming bridegroom, whose coming we know neither the day nor the hour. These lessons, this Sunday, represent an encroachment of Advent into these last "ordinary" Sundays after Trinity. Or, positively, we could say that today is a warm-up for Advent, which was never intended to be so much a fast before the Christmas feast as a sort of temporal compass, an historical positioning system, directing our gaze into the future to a time, though we know neither the day nor the hour, when the Bridegroom shall indeed come.

Our Lord, in this parable of wise and foolish bridesmaids, reminds us that history is not, as the pagan Greeks conceived, an endless cycle turning and returning – lather, rinse repeat. Nor is it simply an endless procession of years, centuries, and millennia till the sun burns itself out or we blow ourselves up, whichever comes first. Nor is history, as the cynic had it, "just one damn thing after another."ⁱⁱ Rather, history is a story, a divine drama, with a beginning, middle, and an end - that end, though we know neither the day nor the hour - when Christ "shall come in glory to judge both the quick and the dead."

In his book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau wrote about his decision to move to a small cabin by a pond and memorably said that he "went into the woods to live deliberately." With the example of these bridesmaids, Jesus teaches us that the way of wisdom – what it means to live in the Kingdom of Heaven *now* – is in a different and deeper sense a decision to "live deliberately," to consciously and intentionally place our lives in a particular historical context, to know what the time is, to live everyday understanding our historical location. We look back with gratitude to our Lord's first coming among us – to his great love for us declared on the cross, the triumph of his Resurrection, the glory of his Ascension, and at the same time we gaze forward with hope and prepare with joy for that great Day when the cry will sound at midnight, "Behold the bridegroom; come out to meet him!" – the marriage supper of the Lamb. And history shall end, and we will enter fully into eternity in the fellowship of the Most Blessed Trinity.

Well - how do we live deliberately in this historical location? In the parable, Jesus tells us that though the bridegroom may seem to be delayed, he is certainly coming. "Watch, therefore," he warns and commands. Get ready. Make like a Boy Scout and be prepared.

This entire section of St. Matthew's Gospel is known as Jesus' great eschatological discourse, and there is plenty in it of fire and brimstone and the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. But we should notice where the accent falls in this parable. "Watch," Jesus is saying, because there is a party coming; in fact, it's already underway, and you don't want to miss it. The outside is so bad precisely because the inside is so wonderful, and Hell's pains can only be calculated in terms of opportunity cost. The Bridegroom is coming and the wedding feast is on – and you are invited.

In the Church, our watching and preparing is the adorning of our lives and our life together with the fruit of repentance and good works to offer – not as bribes for an angry and capricious little godling, but as gifts of love and honor, "a fragrant offering and sacrifice" to him who "first loved us and gave himself for us."ⁱⁱⁱ

That is an important difference – a difference that makes all the difference – so let me illustrate:

When I was a boy, my older brother would, with alarming frequency, commit some heinous crime against the public weal and I, though of course entirely innocent, would get swept up in the tide of parental recompense.

Mom would send us both to the room we shared to await our father's coming. During those waiting hours we were not idle, but instead would thoroughly clean up our room – beds made up, dirty clothes in the hamper, shoes into closets, blowgun darts plucked out of the walls and stowed in a drawer. We didn't do this because a clean room would abate Dad's wrath or cause him to commute the sentence, but because a messy room would certainly make things worse.

But you know, now when my parents come to visit, I thoroughly clean the house, sweep up all the dust, and even wash the dog. Ashley and I stock the pantry and put fresh flowers in the room where they will stay. And this is preparation not from fear or dread but from love and to honor their coming. Because as I grew older I grew to understand and appreciate their great love for me, and I have to tell you that in these four weeks since Lucy's birth, I've come to understand and appreciate that love to a degree I couldn't have previously imagined. And that, of course, is only there merest, faintest shadow of the Father's great love for us in Jesus Christ.

Finally, we mark this morning the 160th anniversary of the founding of this parish, and the 160th anniversary of the construction of this beautiful building. So today of all days we should ask, what might it mean for this parish family to watch, to prepare, to adorn its life as a gift of love and honor for Christ when he comes? Our Lord's coming in glory is the far and ultimate horizon of history for which we are to watch and prepare. But there are nearer and anticipatory comings at which it is – or it should be – our privilege and joy to honor and adore Him even now: there are, for instance, the everyday encounters with the naked and hungry and sick, whom to clothe and feed and visit is to is to clothe and feed and visit and love and honor Christ himself.^{iv}

And of course there is another near horizon of his coming, and that day and hour we do know; in fact it arrives in just a few more minutes. Our Lord comes to us, gives himself to and for us on this Altar, this morning.

“Watch, therefore” – and let us prepare with joy to meet our Lord.

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ⁱ I should note that Master Crawford, in strict accordance with his policy of *deny, deny, deny* any past word or deed attributed to him, now disavows this story.

ⁱⁱ This quote is variously attributed; Edna St. Vincent Millay, though, gave it a provocative twist: “It is not true that history is just one damn thing after another; it's one damn thing over and over.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Eph 5.2; cf. 1 Jn 4.19

^{iv} Mt 25.31-40