

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; Matthew 25:1-13; I Thess. 4:13-18

The lectionary for the 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time deals with faithfulness in working for God's kingdom (i.e., living an alternative public lifestyle under the authority of an alternative king).

Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25 is Joshua's famed challenge to Israel after their conquest of the Promised Land. Israel has successfully created a beachhead for themselves in Palestine by taking a number of its key cities in both its north and its south, and either controls or dominates much of its central lands. Now, all of Israel has been assembled together at Shechem. Joshua gathers the elders of all the tribes and recites to them God's mighty saving acts in Israel, beginning with Abraham through their conquest of Palestine.

Joshua then places before Israel the challenge that has become one of the best-known and oft-repeated challenges of the scripture. "Choose this day whom you will serve. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15)! With this inspirational statement made by Joshua, Israel chooses to serve Yahweh.

The depth and implications of the decision demanded by Joshua that the people of Israel must make regarding where their loyalty will lie is understandable only if we understand the cosmology of all ancient peoples in the Near East. They all believed in many gods (including the Israelites; they were not yet monotheists). Those gods fell into two primary categories – household gods and territorial gods. The household gods were "private" gods of each family, and basically protected their family from any evil that other gods or people might do against them (cf. Genesis 31:22-42; Judges 18:14-20).

The more powerful territorial gods were lords over their specific territory. To the Hebrews, Amon-Re was the supreme god over Egypt, Yahweh over the desert and Ba'al over Palestine. The true significance of Israel's liberation from Egypt was Yahweh's defeat of Amon-Re in Amon-Re's homeland (all the plagues were Yahweh's use of minor Egyptian deities to defeat Amon-Re, reaching culmination in the taking of the first-born of every Egyptian family¹). Now, Israel's conquest of the Promised Land was a clear indication that Yahweh was more powerful than the territorial gods of the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites and the Jebusites (24:12), because they could not have fallen to the numerically inferior Hebrews if Yahweh had not successfully warred against their gods.

It is in the light of both Israel's liberation from Egypt and the conquest of the Promised Land that Joshua now makes this demand upon all the Israelites. The demand is twofold, for to choose which god you will serve is also to choose the public lifestyle you will choose as a nation.

Except for Yahweh, all the territorial and household gods were "nature" deities. That is, the task of that god was to control the vagaries of nature within the territory or the household over which

¹ Amon-Re was the god of life, specifically incarnated in the person of the Pharaoh and the Pharaoh's first-born son. For Yahweh to visit Egypt with the death of all first-born sons, both of people and of animals, and especially to take the life of Pharaoh's own son was a total and complete defeat of Amon-Re.

they had authority. The purpose of these gods was to make life predictable, free of radical, uncontrolled change. The economy of each nation and household was built upon the regular and predictable turn of the seasons, and its political realities were built upon the predictability of that economy. The fear of floods, volcanic eruptions, fire, drought or any other chaos (including the chaos of war) ate at the very being of every ancient culture, threatening to destroy or disrupt it. Therefore, the placating of the gods to guarantee the predictability of nature was the most strategic of acts.

To guarantee the maintenance of a cooperative nature and nature's gods, the people insisted upon an orderly, predictable politics and economics. They therefore embraced a politics of order over liberty and an economics of stability over equitability or elimination of poverty. Thus, people felt most safe when they lived under a monarchy that was either in league with the territorial god responsible for controlling nature (king and the priests sacrificing to the god to appease his wrath and working in unison together), as was the case in Canaan or in which the monarch was the very incarnation of the territorial god – a God-man (as in the case of Egypt's Pharaoh and Pharaoh's first-born son). Thus, by worshipping a nature deity, humanity had opted for a secure society built upon a religion of control, an oppressive politics of unilateral power and a centralized economics of exploitation.

Yahweh upset all that! Yahweh was not a nature deity, but the god of history! His very name identified him as such: "He who causes to be what is caused to be" – that is, he who makes things happen! Rather than being the god of predictability, he was the god of change. He overturned the neat tables of the ancient world! He had the power to use the forces of nature against both nature deities and their king/priest representatives (plagues, parting of the Reed Sea, making the sun stand still, manna from heaven, a Law Code from a volcano, parting of the Jordan River). He could defeat those deities and their representatives at will. He could take "the fewest of all peoples" and liberate them from bondage to the world's most powerful monarch and defeat that monarch's most powerful god. He could mold them into a people in the desert. He could create in that desert a nation whose primary objective was the building of each person's and the entire nation's love relationship with Yahweh and each other, a politics of justice that guaranteed an equitable sharing of power by everyone, and an economics of corporate stewardship of wealth so that "there will be no poor among you". What Israel had embraced in the desert was an entirely different understanding and practice of being a nation and a people than had ever been developed by any nation before them.

And now they had taken the land that God had given to them. And they were now at the place where they were ready to create their own, new, liberated nation. Thus, the decision was before them. Would they choose to build that nation and its public life on the new ways, the revolutionary and radical ways of Yahweh? Or would they build that nation on the ways of the world they had always known and all humanity had always accepted?

That this was the issue before them is beautifully indicated by the *actual* demand Joshua placed before Israel. The popular statement normally attributed to Joshua ("Choose you this day whom you will serve; but as for me and my household, we will serve Yahweh") is not what he actually said. The actual statement in scripture is this: "Now therefore revere Yahweh, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and

in Egypt, and serve Yahweh. Now if you are unwilling to serve Yahweh, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve Yahweh” (Joshua 24:14-15).

What would Israel do? Would they embrace God and be faithful to the task of building a nation that would recognize Yahweh as its king? Would they practice a politics of shared power resulting in no dispossessed and an economics of shared wealth that would eliminate poverty? Would the Hebrew people embrace a radical alternative public lifestyle that was in opposition to the lifestyle of the rest of the world? Would they live under the authority of their alternative king, their God of history? Or would they choose to be like all the other nations of the earth and become a nation of control, oppression and exploitation? The decision was up to them.

Israel responded enthusiastically, “Far be it from us that we should forsake Yahweh to serve other gods” (24:16)! But Joshua knew better. He replied, “You cannot serve Yahweh, for he is a holy God” (vs. 19). He knew that the people’s mouths declared their commitment to Yahweh. But he also knew that their hearts would follow the more tempting way of the world, of a society of dominance rather than of liberation, of greed rather than equitable sharing of wealth, of unilateral power rather than freedom, of Ba’al rather than Yahweh. Joshua knew that the course of Israel that would continue from that day to a rejected Messiah 1,200 years later, would be one of a people always struggling with the issue placed before them. Therefore, his challenge to them was, “Choose you this day whom you will serve!” For the remainder of their existence as a people and the remainder of the existence of the religions flowing from them (e.g., Christianity, Judaism and Islam) would always be the struggle between the service of God or of the embrace of the “gods” of power, greed and domination that would always remain a severe temptation to them and to all humankind!

Psalm 78:1-7 is the opening of a lengthy psalm (72 verses) that is basically a recital of Israel’s history. It opens, not with the praise of God, but rather with “dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us” (78:2b-3). What those “dark sayings” will soon demonstrate is that Israel has gone through a continuing cycle of being blessed by God, becoming arrogant in that blessing, then being punished by God for their unfaithfulness, repenting and receiving God’s forgiveness, being once more blessed by God, and then becoming arrogant in that blessing. Thus, the cycle continues on, over and over. God, in the midst of all this, will still remain God ethically and morally, so that Israel must recognize “the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done” (vs. 4b). But Israel will keep on “choosing this day” – whether to serve God or to serve Ba’al and the marks of Ba’al worship: oppression, exploitation and domination of the people in order for the elite to garner power to themselves.

What makes this psalm unique, however, is how clearly this psalmist presents the vicious cycle into which Israel keeps falling. This is particularly true in verses 32-41 of this psalm.

“In spite of all this (that is, God’s mighty acts in the wilderness and in bringing them miraculously into the Promised Land) they still sinned; they did not believe in his wonders. So

he made their days vanish like a breath, and their years in terror. When he punished them, they sought for him; they repented and sought God earnestly. They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer. But they flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues. Their heart was not steadfast toward him; they were not true to his covenant. Yet he, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them; often he restrained his anger and did not stir up all his wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again. How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert! They tested God again and again, and “provoked the Holy One of Israel”.

Matthew 25:1-13 is an allegorical parable told by Jesus. In this parable, ten bridesmaids are awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom and his entourage. Five have laid in an adequate amount of fuel for their lamps to keep them lit through a potentially-long night, and the other five have not. Those who have not laid by enough oil run out of their limited supply, and have to go to a merchant to buy more. While they are getting more fuel, the bridegroom arrives with his guests and enters the wedding banquet room and the five bridesmaids who have adequate fuel join him. When the five who had to buy more oil return, they find the banquet in progress, the door shut and barred, and they are denied entrance.

In this parable, Jesus is the bridegroom and the wedding banquet symbolizes God’s kingdom – human society as God intended it to be and as presented throughout scripture (such as in Joshua 24). The bridesmaids represent the church – God’s present alternative community, God’s presence in the world as it actually is. The lamps held by the church that provide light to the world symbolize the mission task of the Christian community. The oil, which enables the lamps to stay lit, represents the faithful, active, obedient commitment of each follower of Jesus. Therefore, by its very nature, it can’t be borrowed by others; each person, instead, must be faithful in his own discipleship.

What the parable is declaring, therefore, is that God calls every Christian and every Christian community (the “bridesmaids”) to be faithful to the vision of God’s kingdom, and to actively be at work for the realization of that kingdom. “Being at work” means that God’s people work for a world in which each person and all society is in relationship with God and each other, the entire community is seeking to act justly in its political life and equitable in its economic life, and being wise stewards of God’s wealth that God invests in us in order to eliminate poverty. That building of the kingdom consists of relational and spiritual action. But it also includes concrete political and economic action, as well, for “of such is the kingdom of God”.

There are really three primary nuances in this parable, all of which must be given attention if its rich meaning is to instruct and motivate the church.

The first nuance is that of timing. A key line in the parable is the phrase, “Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (implied: that the bridegroom will arrive) (vs. 13). Why did the five “wise” bridesmaids have enough oil to last the night while the five “foolish” bridesmaids did not? In essence, the five “wise” had recognized that the wait might be long and therefore prepared accordingly. The five “foolish” had assumed the wait would be short and had therefore

inadequately prepared. Essentially, what Jesus was saying was “Don’t be fooled into thinking that my return and the consequent bringing in of God’s kingdom will happen soon after my death and resurrection. It will be a long, long period of time. Therefore, do not carry out your ministry in my name expecting either immediate results or that it can be accomplished with a brief spurt of energy. Your service of humanity through me needs to be a “long obedience in the same direction”. Plan on carrying out your work for the world’s transformation carefully, thoroughly, even ploddingly operating on the premise that it will not happen in your lifetime but that you are a contributing factor in the kingdom’s coming. Only in that way will you be truly faithful to the carrying out of “the gospel of the kingdom”!”

On the other hand, Jesus is also warning the disciples not to become complacent regarding his return and to “rest on their oars”. There are two dangers God’s people face in regards to building God’s shalom. The first danger is that they will have an unreasonable expectation of the difficulty and immensity of the task, so that they expect immediate victory and never settle down to the hard task of working for the entirety of their life for the realization of the kingdom in society which they will never live to see realized! The other danger is that they will perceive Christ’s return to be so far in the future that they become slovenly and unmotivated, thinking that their contribution doesn’t matter. Either way, the result will be that kingdom work doesn’t get done. “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour!”

The second nuance is that of preparation. St. Augustine (354-430) made a most profound point when he wrote of this parable, “Since every Christian has received the name of virgin,² why then are five admitted and five rejected? They are both virgins, and yet half are rejected. It is not enough that they are virgins but that they also have lamps. They are virgins by reason of abstinence from unlawful indulgence of the senses. But they have lamps by reason of good works. Of these good works the Lord says, “Let your works shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” Again he said to his disciples, “Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning.” In the “girded loins” is virginity. In the “burning lamps” is good works”.³

Quoting from Matthew 5:16 and Luke 12:35 to make his point, Augustine makes an important differentiation between the five “wise virgins” and five “foolish virgins”. What all these bridesmaids had in common was that they were all virgins; they were all people of “girded loins”. This was who they were and who we Christians are – people who have been chosen by God, beloved by Jesus, called and set apart by the Spirit for the service of God and humanity. But the real point that Jesus is making is what we choose to do about who we are. We are chosen to await the bridegroom. So the issue is not whether we are Christian enough; that’s God’s business, not ours! Rather, the issue is how we choose to await Jesus’ second coming. Are we foolish, making inadequate preparation for and failing to apply ourselves to the mission to which we are called? Or are we wise, “giving heart and soul and mind and strength to serve

² Although the NRSV uses the word “bridesmaids” to refer to these ten women (for that, by the context of the parable, is what they unquestionably are), the actual Greek word used here is *parthenos*, which is “virgin”. Augustine, working from the Greek, is consequently being faithful in referring to the bridesmaids as virgins.

³ St. Augustine, *Sermon 93:2*.

the King of Kings”⁴ through working for God’s kingdom of shalom through our public engagement in the political, economic, social and spiritual arenas of this world?

The third nuance is that of mission clarity. God’s call to “virgin” Christians is always a call to invest in God’s future intentions for the world (the term “will be like” in 25:1 focuses the parable on the future fulfillment of God’s empire, toward which we work in the present). It is a call to be working for both the transformation of individuals and of society as a whole, so that all might participate in the wedding banquet. All of us are called to be faithful to that vision. But the fact of the matter, Jesus is declaring, is that some will be faithful and others will be unfaithful. Those who are faithful are already chosen to realize the world as God intended it to be, for someday they will be embraced by that kingdom for which they have worked so hard. But others who are unfaithful to that vision will find the door to God’s kingdom shut and bolted, and thus will find themselves rejected because of their unfaithfulness.

I Thessalonians 4:13-18 is a passage on the second coming of Christ. That which has occasioned the writing of this passage is Paul’s recognition that, while the Thessalonian Christians exhibit significant *faith* and *love*, they lack any real *hope* either for themselves or for the church (cf. 3:6, 3:10). These Christians have believed all along that Jesus will return in triumph, and they assume that this return will be soon. The church has also been around long enough that some of its most faithful members have died. That has created a real dilemma for the Thessalonians. For believers expecting an immediate return of Christ, how could it be that some would have died? Did not Christ love them too? If so, why did he allow them to die before his return? Is it possible that Jesus isn’t going to return at all, or that our faith is false? The result of such speculation was that the Thessalonian Church had a severe case of depression, and a consequent absence of hope. It is to this situation that Paul is seeking to speak. And he does so with these words.

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words” (4:13-18).

Paul deals with the depression of the Thessalonian Christians by first reminding them of a Christian creed: “Jesus died and rose again” (4:14a). He then builds upon that creed by stating that if this creed is true (and of course we know it is), then “through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died” (vs. 14b). Thus, God does not promise us that no Christians will die between Jesus’ resurrection and his coming again. Of course they will. But when he comes again, Christ will include those who have died in the general resurrection from the dead occasioned by his return!

⁴ “Rise Up, O Men of God”, *The Worshipbook* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), Hymn 564.

Paul then does something quite remarkable, although it escapes us in our English translations of this passage. The word Paul uses that is translated “the coming of the Lord” (vs. 15) is the Greek word “parousia”. *Parousia* is a technical word. It is the term for a king, victorious in battle, who is making a triumphant entry back into his capital city. Thus, Christ’s second coming will be like that of the return of a victorious king to claim his rightful throne and to return life in that kingdom back to what God has always intended it to be.

What, then, is to be our response as believers in this Jesus? Whether we have died in faithfulness or whether we still live as those who are faithful to the kingdom, we will join that triumphant procession, and we will take that city for Christ and His Kingdom. That is our hope, and that is our mission. Then Paul concludes, “Encourage one another with these words” (vs. 18)!

Like Joshua 24 and Matthew 25:1-13, this passage is also about being faithful to Christ and his kingdom. Whether we die as obedient Christians or whether we continue living, we are to live our lives embracing the alternative lifestyle to which we are called by God, and to be working for the realization of the world as God created and intended it to be politically, economically and religiously. And this we must do because we are living under the authority of our alternative king!

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