

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; Matthew 25:14-30; I Thessalonians 5:1-11

One of the best known books written by Eugene Peterson has the intriguing title, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980). That title is taken from a statement by Friedrich Nietzsche¹, and describes an essential ingredient to an effective life – the capacity to “keep on keeping on”. Last Sunday’s lectionary dealt with the characteristic of resolve, of dogged determination, of perseverance as an essential characteristic of faithfulness. This Sunday’s lectionary deals with active working for the kingdom of God as an integral part of faithfulness.

Judges 4:1-7 tells the story of the Israelite judge and prophetess, Deborah and her general Barak in opposition to King Jabin of Canaan and his general, Sisera. Israel is being oppressed by Jabin. Deborah summons Barak to take command of the armies of the tribes of Israel and to war against Sisera. God’s promise to Barak coming through the prophetess is “I will give Sisera into your hand” (4:7). Barak rejoins by telling Deborah that he will go into battle against Sisera only if she accompanies him (vs. 8). Deborah agrees, Barak raises the army, attacks Sisera at Mount Tabor and defeats the army of Canaan. Sisera flees in retreat, stops at a tent where he is hidden by Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite. But while he is sleeping, the woman Jael kills him by driving a tent peg through his skull (4:21)!

What does this story have to do with proactive obedience to God as a manifestation of faithfulness? Everything! Barak is essentially a timid general, so cautious that he is unwilling to take God at God’s word and pursue an aggressive course. He asks Deborah to risk her life to verify her prophecy of victory (4:8), and thus asks a spiritual leader to do what he was supposed to do – to lead the Israelite army to victory. He hesitated to go into battle against Sisera at Mount Tabor in spite of Deborah’s reassurance that this was what God was calling him to do and that God had promised a great victory.

As a military strategist, Barak’s hesitation was understandable. Mount Tabor was indefensible. A rounded hillock isolated on the north side of the Plain of Jezreel, Mount Tabor was unprotected and didn’t even afford cover for an army. Sisera, with the lightening speed of his 900 chariots, horses and soldiers (4:3), could easily have surrounded any foot army like Israel’s and slaughter it. However, victory had been assured to Barak by Deborah’s prophecy – if he chose to believe it. But he didn’t. Barak’s faith wasn’t equal to his military judgment. So he hesitated. And only Deborah’s willingness to be present on the battlefield at considerable risk to herself assuaged his fear.

Sensing Barak’s hesitancy, Debra prophesied a second time. “The road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (4:9). Barak is punished for doubting God’s word and refusing to act upon it without considerable reassurance. Even though he wins a great victory against the army of King Jabin, he does not get to take its general. Rather, Sisera is delivered into the hands of the woman Jael who, convincing

¹ “The essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (London: 1907), pp. 106-109.

him to rest from his exhausting battle and flight, drives a stake through his skull as he sleeps. So Jael succeeds where faithless Barak fails. Action overwhelms hesitancy!

Psalm 123 is a psalm of amazing liberation and even revolutionary intent. Its beginning seduces us into thinking that it will be a psalm about obedience and even dependence. But it quickly turns into a psalm that describes both impatience with those who tolerate injustice and the necessity to act powerfully in order to act justly.

The psalm begins, “To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us” (123:1-2).

The image is one of a slave crouching at the edge of a room in which his master or mistress is conducting business or pleasure. But the slave is not sitting there relaxed; rather his body is in a state of tension, ready to leap into action upon the ever-so-subtle movement of his master’s or her mistress’ hand, demanding the servant’s attendance upon him or her. Thus, the psalmist suggests, we who faithfully follow Yahweh also wait in alert attendance upon God, ready to leap to God’s signal that he demands our response. So the psalm begins with this imagery of coiled response.

But then the image changes. The action occurs. And the action is unmistakably harsh. “Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud” (vv. 3-4).

The psalm reacts negatively to the master or mistress, with the power of life or death over their slaves, treating people in this manner. The psalmist prays for God to have mercy upon the crouching servant, and to thus release him from having to live in such constraint and supplication before the mighty and powerful. Rather, the psalmist has reached the limits of his patience with the politically, economically or religiously powerful that use their position to display their power and wealth at the price of enslaved servants. And in this psalm, he begins to fight back! That fighting back begins, not with blows but with words. The Psalmist declares that he has had “more than enough of (being treated with) contempt” and “scorn of those who are at ease” while he has to be so hard at work. So it is that this psalmist is ready both to gather and to use the power at his disposal, and to pray to Yahweh to amass more power so that this slave and all those slaves with which he works can win their independence from their master/mistress and become free men and women! Thus, this is a psalm of revolution!

Matthew 25:14-30 is the primary passage of this trilogy of texts. It is one of Jesus’ most famous parables.

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with

them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents'. His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return, I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for his worthless slave, throw him into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'" (25:14-30).

There are two ways to read this parable. The first way to read it is the one favored by most commentators, and is well-loved by most Christians. But as we will see later in this commentary, there are serious problems in interpreting the parable this way. And it is certainly not consistent with the unified message of the parables that surround it (the parables of the ten bridesmaids [25:1-13], the unfaithful slave [24:45-51]) and the account of the judgment of the nations that follows it [25:31-46]).

The first way of reading this parable is to perceive it actually as an allegory. This interpretation suggests that Jesus sees himself as the master going into the "far country". The slaves are his disciples. The property the master invests in them is the mission of the Kingdom of God. The long time that the master is away is the period of time between Jesus' going away (his death and resurrection) and his return (the second coming) – in other words, the present. The rewards the faithful slaves receive are the commendation and investment that Jesus makes in them as the result of their faithfulness. Being cast into outer darkness is not a description of hell, but rather the judgment the unfaithful slave receives for not following a "long obedience in the same direction".

In this interpretation of the parable, the three unnamed disciples are given the same mission – to take the gospel they have been given and to invest it in the world so that there are measurable returns from that investment. The image of "talent" is revised by the interpreters of this passage

from being a stated amount of money to that of being a skill or ability that is used by the servant to enhance the gospel in the world. With such an interpretation, this parable is telling us that if we want to be seen by Jesus as a “good and trustworthy slave”, we need to take the talents that God has invested in us and use them for Christ and His Kingdom. We are to invest in other people those skills and abilities we have been given, so that they too come to Christ and become active members of God’s shalom community working equally hard for Christ’s kingdom throughout the world.

The parable is thus applied to us all by asking the question, “What will we do with this investment Jesus has made in us”? Will we become proactive, working hard for the kingdom, willing to risk the capital invested in us in pursuit of the interest? Will our faithfulness to Christ and His Kingdom be expressed through our commitment to focus our entire lives on the sharing of the vision of the shalom community and working for it in everything we do? Or will we be like the third slave who hides in the ground the great treasure Christ has invested in us, afraid to chance anything on the dream of the kingdom, and thus end up being no good to ourselves, to the world or to Christ? What will we choose to do with Jesus’ investment in us?

This is the first way this parable is interpreted. And it is certainly a motivating interpretation that calls us to commitment. But there are several almost insurmountable problems with interpreting this parable this way. The first is that this interpretation doesn’t take seriously the unique role of a “household” in first century Israel (which we will explore below). By beginning the parable with the words, “A man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them”, Jesus was describing the well-known operation of an elite household that would be known to every Jew. The people listening to Jesus would, from the very beginning of the parable and those words, identify the rich man as the villain, the first two slaves as the henchmen of the rich man and the final slave as the hero of the story. Why that is so will be developed below.

The second problem with this parable is the criticism of the rich man by the third servant. “Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed” (vs. 24) – in other words, an exploiter of the people. It is further intriguing that the rich man doesn’t deny the third servant’s claim; rather, he affirms that this is an accurate description of himself (vs. 26). Would Jesus really describe himself this way? If this is an allegorical parable (which almost all commentators that interpret the passage this traditional way assert) and Jesus is the rich man, why would Jesus describe himself as an exploiter of the people? He would do so only if he didn’t intend an interpretation of the rich man as being himself!

The third problem in interpreting this parable as being about the responsible use of the skills and abilities invested in us by God is that the text doesn’t allow that interpretation. This parable is about money and the legitimate and illegitimate use of money. A “talent” was a specific amount of money, a Greek monetary amount valued at 10,000 drachma. Since a drachma was worth a day’s labor (about \$200 - \$300),² a talent was worth between two million and three million dollars! There was no concept at the time of Jesus of a talent being a skill or ability. To interpret the parable this way would have occurred to absolutely none of its hearers – not even Jesus!

² F. Dale Bruner, *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 553.

The final problem is that of context. A primary principle of biblical exegesis is that a passage must be read and interpreted within its context. That is, the stories about Jesus (for example) are not told in strictly historical order in the four Gospels; they are grouped by theme and message, so that several similarly-themed stories follow one another. That is clearly the case in Matthew 24:45 through 25:46. These are all stories about “a long obedience in the same direction”, of faithfulness being practiced under severe and even terminable circumstances, calling the faithful to profound and unexpected levels of commitment to God and neighbor. Holding to a “talent” interpretation of this parable, one can twist it to mean that the two successful slaves were faithfully serving their master, but the master they were serving was self-admittedly “a harsh man, reaping where (he) did not sow and gathering where (he) did not scatter seed”. Would that be an example of the kind of long-term obedience to which Jesus would call his community? There has to be a better way of reading this parable. And there is.

The second way of reading this parable is to see the third slave who “hid (the master’s) talent in the ground” as the hero, the master as the villain, and the other two slaves as exploiters along with the master. How can one read this parable this way?

The place to begin is with the obvious recognition that Jesus’ parables were not originally meant for our ears. They were meant for the ears of the peasants who listened to him in Palestine! And they would have heard the parable through their filter of their understanding of the realities of their world. Thus, if we do not explore the parables using that same filter, we cannot understand the context in which Jesus was telling this parable and, consequently, how it was that the people would interpret it.³

When Jesus began his parable with the words, “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability”, these words not only set the stage for the story to follow; it also set the minds of everyone listening to the story.⁴

This was no ordinary man. That he was “going on a journey” and would be away for “a long time” was an indication that this man was an extremely wealthy man, the head of a powerful family and a Jewish aristocrat. When the Jewish people of Jesus’ time referred to “households”, they didn’t mean a peasant family of mom, dad and their three children! A “household” was the basic economic and cultural unit of society upon which the power of the city and the state was built. It was, above all, an economic unit in which its leaders were related by “blood”, but which was primarily centered upon the control, management and earning of considerable money. No peasant family or even middle-class family would be perceived as a “household”; only the most wealthy and powerful would be.

³ An example of this would be the popular American expression (which you would never hear in Europe or in Africa), “Three strikes and you’re out”. The term (as any American would know) had its origins in the world of baseball where, if a batter swung at a ball three times and missed or the ball enter the strike zone of the batter without being swung on, the batter had to leave the batting box and his team was recorded an out. But the term has now come to mean much than that, so that today it means that if you break the law three times, you will be declared “out” of freedom and you will be sent to prison for the remainder of your life.

⁴ This interpretation of Matt. 25:14-30 owes much to the work of William Herzog II in his book, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1994), pp. 156-168, and the influence on his work of the studies of Derrett, Jeremias, Kautsky, Sjoberg and Rohrbach.

In fact, the word, “household” pretty much meant in Israel what the word “Mafia” (“the Family”) means in English today – except that the household was not illegal, but was a legitimate and acceptable part of society. That this man could distribute to his three trusted slaves a total of between 16 million and 24 million dollars clearly meant that this was no ordinary man! He was, instead, a *paterfamilias*, a “godfather”! And everybody hearing this story would know that!

These three slaves were no ordinary, run-of-the-mill slaves, either. They had served the godfather well. They were among his most trusted staff (otherwise, he wouldn’t have entrusted to them \$12-15 million, \$4-6 million and \$1-2 million dollars respectively). In the first century, a slave was not necessarily a destitute lackey of a family. He could hold considerable power and influence, and be worth a great deal of money. These three men had obviously proven themselves thoroughly trustworthy in their past performance of their duties, and were therefore being entrusted with a great responsibility of so investing the master’s money that they would each make the largest profit for the master. And while doing so, if they made some “honest graft” (the actual term used) on the side for themselves, that would be fine as well. In one sense, these slaves were completely dependent on the good will of their master. But in another sense, they were immensely valuable to him and he would not have minded if they richly rewarded themselves in the process of doubling their master’s estate.

There is one other intriguing point in these opening words of Jesus. The Greek translation of Jesus’ words in this passage (Jesus would have spoken in Aramaic) was *kata ten idian dynamin*, which is incorrectly translated “according to their ability”. The word *dynamin* is from the Greek *dynamis* (from which we get the English word, “dynamite”) which means “power”! Jesus was not saying that each of the three slaves were to invest the master’s capital “according to their ability” to make money, but “according to their power”! That is, their status in the *Mafia* was based upon the comparative power and influence each exercised, so that the one receiving the most money was the most powerful and the one receiving the least the least powerful. But all were powerful, competent and proven slaves; there would have been many, many other “household” slaves who received no money. But these three received proportions of the aristocrat’s assets to use their respective “powers” (whether legal or illegal) to make as large a profit as possible.

All of this, Jesus’ listeners would have understood through those opening words spoken by Jesus as he set the scene for his story. The godfather goes off on a long journey where, presumably, he increased his power, wealth and influence through the deals he made on his trip. Already “sitting pretty”, the master eventually returned from his trip and called together his trusted slaves for an accounting of how they had invested his millions.

The first two slaves give virtually the same report. They have “invested” the master’s money and doubled his assets (how much they made on the side for themselves is not discussed). But the crowds, hearing Jesus’ words, would have looked knowingly at each other and acknowledged that they knew well enough how that doubling occurred. It could occur only in one way – at the peasants’ expense. Herzog writes, “The elites used their wealth to make loans to peasant farmers so that the farmers could plant the crops. Interest rates were high; estimates range to 60 percent and perhaps as high as 200 percent for loans on crops. The purpose of making such loans was

not so much to make a large profit, at least by the standards of the ancient world, but to accept land as collateral so that the elites could foreclose on their loans in years when the crops could not cover the incurred indebtedness”.⁵ Thus, these two slaves had doubled the master’s wealth, not only by charging exorbitant interest on loans (the Deuteronomic law forbade *any* interest on loans), but by foreclosing on farms and thus radically increasing the land owned by the godfather. They had done well. And they were rewarded well!

The spotlight of the story now swings to the third servant. And there, Jesus gives a most unexpected report.

“You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest” (vss. 26-27)

The third slave has gone over to the other side! He’s the hero of this story. And he’s the hero because he had seen the evil both of what he was expected to do and the evil of the enterprise in which he had been involved, had been converted, was willing to stand with the exploited by confronting the godfather with an expose of this evil, and was consequently willing to pay the price that such betrayal meant.

It is a magnificent story of conversion. The third slave had been a part of the “system”, and he had benefited from his participation in the system. Formerly, he had commended himself to the master because of his astute management of the wealth of the master, even when that made him participate in the exploitation of the poor and powerless. But something had happened to this man to cause him to see the evil of his ways and to repent. Perhaps being invested with such a large amount of money and recognizing how he would have to use that money to double its investment – that he would have to break the Deuteronomic law, exploit farmers with loans carrying exorbitant interest and foreclose on their farms in order to acquire their land – and knowing the pain and suffering that he would cause the peasants, this man came to himself and realized he could no longer participate in such exploitation. He was not even willing to “invest the money with the bankers”, because even though he would make some interest off of such investments, he knew the bankers would take that money and issue exorbitant loans and foreclose on them with all the rapacity of the other two slaves. And this man was not going to participate – even in a minimal, far-removed way -- in any such exploitation of the poor. But he didn’t want to take that money from the master, either – so he simply buried it in the ground where it could lie “safe and sound” until the man returned and the master’s money could be returned to him.

What this servant did was to “out” his master! He confronted the master with his action that exposed to the master and to all those in attendance upon the master (including his two brother slaves) the evil in which they were engaged. They were destroying families – other households – and they were taking advantage of the peasant class for their own personal profit. They had been captured by greed, and therefore had become the epitome of evil – even if their evil was legal! And that greed had been exposed by this servant for all the world to see.

⁵ Herzog, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

An intriguing insight is how the godfather interpreted this expose of evil. He called the servant “wicked and lazy”. He admits without any sense of reproach to himself that he openly “reaped where I did not sow, and gathered where I did not scatter” – that is, stole from the poor. He blamed the slave for not investing his money, even at low interest with the bankers. In other words, he cannot see the evil that he is doing. It is all just “good business” – even if it creates a class of expendables, results in peasants being forced into poverty, treats fellow Jews as if they are nothing more than pawns for his own acquisition of power. He cannot even perceive the negative or evil impact of his own actions – the common plight of the powerful!

In this act, this slave had gone over to the other side! He had become the prophet, the betrayer, the whistle-blower, the divulger who had lain bare the evil of the powerful. And he had done it from the inside, for he had been one of those who had benefited greatly from such avarice in the past. But now he had recognized the community-destroying havoc that such an effort to build economic and political power has, he had exposed it, and he had embraced Jesus’ (and ancient Israel’s) call to a shalom community for all (including all peasants), a community of justice, economic equality and the love of God. In a profound way, this man, too, confessed “Once I was blind, but now I see” (John 9:25).

And what did this whistle-blower receive for going over to the other side? The godfather declares, “So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (vss. 28-30).

What will be the result of such exposure of the systems by those who become convinced of the evil that they are doing? The result will be that the systems won’t change. The result will be that they will crush the protestor – even when he has been one of them. They will take away the wealth or power invested in him or her and distribute it to those who already have the most power, increasing their proportion of power. And they will take this now-worthless (to the system) slave “and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”.

Jesus places this reality in the form of a proposition. “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (vs. 29). It is crucial to the sense of this passage to realize that Jesus is not endorsing or embracing this principle. He is simply saying that this is the way the world is. This is how rapacious and overly-powerful political, economic and religious systems operate. The more they have, the more they will acquire. And they will acquire more by taking it away from the powerless so that even the little that the poor may have will be taken away from them. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. And this is simply the way that the world works!

What, then, can change society? What can bring about society’s transformation into the world as God intends it to be? It will not be by one person becoming the lone voice in the wilderness, the one who exposes the systems and human evil for what it is. When it is just one who stands up to the systems and calls them to accountability – even when that one has once been a most trusted colleague of that system – it is easy for the system to crush him, to “take the talent from him”

and “throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”. Change can occur only when the people work together, work in concert with each other, work with careful strategy to call the systems and the people to accountability, and work for specific, concrete change. For, when there are thousands of you, not even the Roman Empire can eliminate you all and must therefore come to some accommodation with you.

Consequently, it takes the people of God working together, faithfully following a “long obedience in the same direction” that will bring about the transformation of the world into God’s intentions for it. That is the essential message of this parable. And that is the message of all these stories that Jesus has grouped together, as he spurs his followers to understand to practice the depth of what true faithfulness to each other, to Jesus and to God entails.

There is one other nuance in this story. In one sense, this parable stands as an exquisite analysis both of the insidious nature of corporate evil and of the response that must come from God’s people if they are to engage that evil and work for its transformation without being seduced by it. But in another sense, there is more to this parable than that. This parable also implies that Jesus will become the One who stands alone, revealing to the high priests, to Pilate, to the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and even to the people how overwhelmingly and insidiously they have allowed possessions, pride, position and the worship of power to dominate them. Jesus will be the One standing alone who reveals to them how far they have strayed from God’s best intentions for them. And because he is one, they will destroy them. They will kill him, Jesus is implying in this parable, and they will think that because he is dead, what he began a few years ago will also be dead. But they are not accounting for God. And they are not accounting for the magnificent way God works in human lives. For this Jesus will rise from the dead, and in his rising, will raise a defeated people with him. And they will become the harbingers of God’s New Creation, the new people of God who will spread throughout Israel, then Samaria, and finally to the uttermost parts of the Roman Empire replacing it with a new empire – an empire of justice, equity and the embrace of God’s love for us and our love for each other. Thus, the Roman Empire will not be able to stop Jesus’ new community, for they will everywhere be bursting forth into the world, exposing the lies and proclaiming and living out the truth. For this parable is telling us that from the One will come the many who will generate the spiritual power that will profoundly impact the world for Christ and His Kingdom.

I Thessalonians 5:1-11 is an apocalyptic passage, centered upon the statement, “The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (5:2). Just when everyone feels secure is exactly when they are most vulnerable, Paul the Apostle teaches in this passage. We go about our daily lives, eating, drinking, loving, working, “taking care of business”. But suddenly, in the midst of the everyday, when we least expect it, the day of the Lord will come! Therefore, stay alert; stay concentrated upon serving God’s Kingdom, and center your life in kingdom work!

Paul builds this passage around the Old Testament image of “the Day of the Lord” (Joel 2:1, 31; Amos 5:18; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Mal. 4:5). The “Day of the Lord”, the writers in the Hebrew Bible attest, seems like the day of promise and vindication for the Jewish people. But, in reality, it will be a day of God’s swift judgment upon all for having ignored and not worked for God’s intentions for the world. Instead, God’s people (and all of humanity) have centered on building a

world of greed and exploitation, unilateral power and oppression, control and domination. The Day of the Lord will be God's quick judgment upon the entire world – a day to fear for Jew and Gentile alike!

The Day of the Lord will occur, the Apostle Paul suggests in this scripture, for both Christians and non-Christians. It will be a day of judgment -- sudden and inescapably catastrophic for non-Christians (Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:5, 16; II Cor. 1:14; II Thess. 2:1, 2; II Peter 3:10-13). But for those who have lived out an authentic Christianity, it will be their day of vindication and reward, as they are reunited with Christ and witness his kingdom coming in its totality.

What is significant about this passage from I Thessalonians, however, is what Paul says Christians need to be about while awaiting the Day of the Lord. While you wait for the Parousia (the coming of the conquering king), continue your work to be a transforming presence in the world. "Be at peace among yourselves", Paul writes. "Admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted; help the weak; be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all" (5:13b-15). The Day of the Lord will inevitably come. So live in that hope, and keep on working for Christ and His Kingdom.

When I was in seminary, I once had a professor say to us, "The kingdom of God will come upon this earth in God's good time and only with Christ's intervention. But at all times, you should be working for that kingdom as if it's very coming depended upon you!" I have never forgotten his words. And it has shaped my life and ministry ever since. As the angel said to the disciples standing in awe at Jesus' ascension into heaven, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). In other words, God will take care of Christ's ascension and return. In the meanwhile, don't stand around "looking up toward heaven", waiting for his return. Get to work in the world for Christ and His Kingdom. Get to work, acting out God's kingdom of justice, equity and love. That – and only that -- is truly a long obedience in the same direction!

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