

A Sermon by Fr. Davenport, 9 November 2008

Pentecost XXVI, Proper 27, Year A

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

1 Thessalonians, 4:13-18

Matthew, 25:1-13

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Throughout much of the '90s I loosely followed politics. I certainly didn't watch the election returns in '92 or '96; in 2000 I went to bed early, missing the drama of that night; and, in '04, I doubt that I made it to midnight. I stayed up later this year, but I am wary of my upward (or is it downward?) arc of interest. I'm eager not to be too passionate or certain about politics. On the other hand, last Tuesday's election signals a profound development – almost certainly less in policy terms than in historic, cultural, social terms. Having an African-American President-elect is amazing, astonishing, staggering; it takes my breath away. 'The Man' is now a black man. Only in America.

That said, as momentous as this may be, let's keep it in perspective of the gospel. The change Jesus offers each of us and every person on the planet is greater. We ultimately place our trust and our hope in God, not in any human being, not in any institution. While we recognize and celebrate aspects of this significant moment and we respect to the authority of the President and other elected officials, they are not as powerful, or as important, or as reliable, or as transformative as Jesus Christ.

It's difficult to exercise some dispassion about the election, but when we do, it's likely that we notice more. One of the things that struck me about President-elect Obama's campaign was the similarity of its marketing to that of President Reagan's, especially how it re-packaged the 'Morning in America' theme. The Obama campaign's symbol, its logo, looked like a rising sun over American farmland; it suggested abundance, light, hope. The Reagan campaign also was extremely effective in communicating hope, including using language associating our country with the true shining city, the New Jerusalem.

Effective American politicians want us to believe in the future. They'll often paint a grim, dark picture of the present, but assure us of happy, sunny tomorrow. They wouldn't achieve popularity by painting the possibility of a bleak future. In our world, that would be interpreted as political incompetence. However, Jesus' primary 'logo' is the cross. Again, and again, and again, Jesus challenges us. In today's gospel, Jesus is clear that for some the future will not be pleasant and sunny at all. He paints a bleak future for the five foolish virgins; they are rejected, abandoned, shut out of the party, not known. For them, it's a horrifying, terrifying future.

The parable is strange and a bit confused with pieces that don't really seem to fit. The bridegroom has left his home and gone off to get his bride and to bring her back to his home. Remaining at his house are ten virgins, who await his return. They anticipate a great marriage feast when he returns. The bridegroom is delayed, it grows dark, and virgins get anxious and leave to meet the bride and bridegroom and to escort them home. Five of the virgins take extra oil for their lamps.

The delay is great enough that the virgins fall asleep. When they awaken to the announcement of the bridegroom's approach, they trim their lamps, but the foolish virgins realize that they don't have enough oil and have to go get some. They're away when the bridegroom comes. They are not prepared. They are left out, excluded, not known.

A logo with a virgin holding a burning lamp in the darkness would be perfect for the Boy Scouts. Always be prepared. It's also the message for Christians. We think of waiting for the coming of Jesus, when the Kingdom of God, the rule of God, will finally be all in all. We tend to think of this as happening only at the end of time. The message to be prepared, however, relates more powerfully to being aware of Jesus presence with us now. The end is now. Jesus is always coming to us, every day, every hour, every minute. He comes to us in the Eucharist, in our prayer, in one another, in service, in forgiveness, and in countless other ways.

Are we on the lookout for him so that we can recognize him with us? Or, do we exclude ourselves from the party? The good news is that if we're prepared, we can welcome him to us now. The Kingdom of God, the rule of God, can take shape in our hearts and minds and in our community now.

Today is our annual Stewardship Sunday. Being good stewards is one way we seize the opportunity for Jesus to come to us. Stewardship involves all that we've been given, but today most of our attention will be directed on wealth. I have four thoughts.

First, talking about money among Christians can be as awkward and impolite as talking about sex. It's a sensitive topic. We want it, we think about it, we enjoy it, but we don't like to talk about it. It arouses guilt. We might try to reason away our feelings of guilt. "I really don't have that much money." One of the things I learned, or re-learned, from my trip to Nicaragua earlier this year was just how incredibly much everyone of us has, how enormous our abundance and prosperity. When we think about how poor we are, we're usually neglecting how much God has given us, we don't appreciate how much we've received.

Most of us feel some discomfort talking about money, and as a parish family if we don't feel discomfort about money, then we're not talking about it enough. Jesus taught about money, and challenged people about money, as much as anything else because what we do with it expresses and shapes who we are. How we spend money expresses our aspiration for ourselves. Who do we want to be? Where we spend tells us. Is it clothing, restaurants, vacations, recreation, entertainment? What comes first? Are we willing to look at our habits and reorder them?

We might assume that if we talk about money and about giving more that the Church trying to manipulate us into something we'll regret, that there's a conspiracy for generosity directed against us. I don't know that I've ever done a bold act of generosity that I've later regretted. I expect that at the end of my life I'm far more likely to regret that I wasn't more generous.

Talking frankly about money is essential if we're going to free ourselves from its grasp. It's the first step to becoming a proportional giver, that is being honest about what our income is and how

much of it we give to Jesus' mission and charities. Are we tithers or tippers? Most of us are in between, but what direction are we moving toward? Is our giving sacrificial?

Part of talking frankly about money is recognizing the anxiety it causes us. Often our anxiety about money is symptomatic of something deeper. We worry about losing our independence, becoming irrelevant, being overlooked, having no comfort or no place to belong. In our culture, money represents influence, control, importance, security; money gives us voice and access. If we don't have 'enough' money, we expect that we'll be left behind, abandoned, forgotten, rejected – like the foolish virgins left out of the party.

Second, God doesn't want us to feel guilty about money or to feel left out. He wants us to trust him. Where do we find our value, our identity? If we see value the way the world does, it seems that Warren Buffet has great value and a destitute man has none. But if we trust God, we know that each of us is of infinite value to God and so to one another. Christian communities try to be faithful to that, valuing every person as important as the next. A person's intrinsic worth is not related to his checkbook. When communities act like that, then we can understand why people are anxious about being left out.

Giving generously helps us to develop trust in God; it develops real faith. We learn that our real worth comes from our relationship to him, that money isn't what gives us security, that we depend upon God – not our wealth and possessions. Giving generously shapes our identity. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is there will be your heart also." (Mt 6:21)

Third, giving helps us become part of something bigger than ourselves. In our world, giving doesn't make sense. The good life is about getting things. Giving seems to erode our resources and to diminish us. This point of view breeds selfishness and weakens communities. Christianity teaches that giving is what builds relationships and gives us value and joy in life. We believe that we have a responsibility to one another and that each of us needs to do our best. To whom much has been given, much is expected. All of us have been given much, and it comes with an obligation, a moral responsibility, to God and to one another.

Fourth, generosity goes hand in hand with gratitude. For Christians, wealth is not what we have, but what we've been given temporarily. We're not taking it with us. We haven't earned it or deserved it, and it doesn't mean that God approves of us more than someone else. Rather, all of life is a gift. All that we tend to assume is ours – possessions, talents, abilities, opportunities, good luck – is a gift from God. God invites us to be like him and to give generously.

Our annual stewardship campaign is an opportunity to act courageously, faithfully, boldly, to allow for new growth and vigor in our lives. In all the fear and fretting in the world, we can take positive steps to prepare for God's coming. If we dare, we can invite him to a fuller place in our lives. Let's prepare ourselves for his coming now.

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