



GOD'S WORD THIS MONTH

NOVEMBER

05

31ST SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

WHO SITS IN THE CHAIR OF MOSES?

Although the Gospels seem to treat them as if they were more or less the same, the scribes and Pharisees were different factions who agreed on very

little, except perhaps their opposition to Jesus. The Pharisees were a largely lay movement, striving to observe every detail of the Law to the best of their ability. The scribes were the learned administrative class, who copied the sacred books and were closely associated with the temple and its hierarchy.

Jesus begins by making a distinction. Scribes and Pharisees hold an important place in Jewish life. By saying that they "occupy the chair of Moses", he acknowledges that they continue to fulfil Moses' role of passing on and interpreting the Law. Some Pharisees, like Hillel the Great, taught a genuinely compassionate religion that looked on human effort with

the eye of followers of the compassionate God of Israel. Others may have been more concerned with adding extra laws drawn from the great mass of unwritten tradition. Jesus is attacking here cold, heartless legalism that makes no effort to help people to comply with its demands, and is only too ready to label them as failures if they stumble under the burden. Another distinction should be made between outward appearance and inward attitude. Every Jewish male wore a shawl with four tassels at the corners, especially at morning prayer. For certain prayers, they also wore *tephillim* (the Hebrew word), or *phylacteries* (the Greek word) on their forehead and right arm. These were small leather boxes containing a few verses from the Law and were attached to hand and forehead by leather straps. The most important verse in the *tephillim* was the *Shema*, Israel's confession of faith. Putting on special dress for prayer can emphasise the sacredness of the prayer, but Jesus reminds his hearers that if the words

are not already on their hearts and minds, no expensive substitute can take its place. The status of the scribes and Pharisees as religious leaders gave them an important place in society: many however got so used to the privilege that they demanded it of right.

The final section of the Gospel is about the use of titles by religious leaders. Matthew recognised the importance of leadership in his community, particularly the role of Peter and others in assuring good order. It is vital for them however to recognise that the source of this authority lies with the one Master and Father of the community and its unique teacher, the Christ. Anyone who wishes to live in the community of Jesus has to put aside any claim to self-importance and follow the path of Jesus that leads to the cross.

TODAY'S READINGS

MAL 1:14-22, 1 THESS 2:7-9, 13
MATTHEW 23:1-12

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GOD'S WORD THIS MONTH

NOVEMBER

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32ND SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

I HAVE NO OIL!

With the liturgical year ending shortly, our Gospel readings for the next few Sundays will focus on the end of the age, and they will be chosen from Jesus' last sermon on the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem (Matthew 24-25).

The Gospel begins with a parable. The situation in it would have been a familiar one to his listeners. Jewish weddings were held in the evening. Family and friends accompanied the groom as he went to bring his bride from her family home to her new home with his family. Her friends welcomed the visitors as they arrived and joined the procession back to his home where the wedding dinner was held. Torches or lamps were needed to provide light. According to our parable, ten girls were given this responsibility, but, as five of them forgot to

bring their oil, the procession threatened to be a disaster. The wedding is late starting: Matthew does not explain why, but observes that the girls had got tired of waiting and had fallen asleep. Suddenly around midnight, word comes that the groom is on his way. There is a frantic flurry of activity to light the lamps, only to discover that there is an oil shortage. Trying to stretch enough oil for five lamps to fill ten won't work, so the girls are sent off to find an oil-shop, an unlikely prospect so late at night.

Despite this chaotic beginning, the wedding feast gets underway. When the five girls return from their shopping expedition, the groom refuses to open the door to them, saying he does not know them. Taking the parable at its face value, this seems unlikely, not to say unfair. Their thoughtlessness might have ruined the wedding but they are relatives, probably just girls with little experience in this sort of thing.

Matthew's use of wedding banquet

imagery earlier in the Gospel should warn us that we are in the world of allegory. Wedding banquets signal above all the union of the Messianic Son of God with his people. The point of the allegory is that we do not know when the Messiah will return, any more than the girls knew when the bridegroom would come. The ten girls represent the Christian community waiting for the Messiah's return. Matthew divides them into 'wise and foolish' to make one of his favourite theological points. The time between the Resurrection and the return of the Son of Man is not 'empty time'. It gives the followers of Jesus the opportunity to prove they are his genuine disciples by devoting themselves to good works. That time is now: there is no point in waiting until the bridegroom is at the door.

TODAY'S READINGS

WIS 6:12-16, 1 THESS 4:13-18
MATTHEW 25:1-13

NOVEMBER

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33RD SUNDAY IN
ORDINARY TIME

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH YOUR TALENTS?

The opening words of the parable warn us that it is another allegory of the Kingdom and the delay of the return of the Son of Man. It takes

the example of a rich man departing on a long journey who divides his property among three individuals. Although they are called servants (an even more exact translation of the original Greek would be 'slaves'), it is probably best to see them as people of some standing. The sums of money involved are very large: one talent would be the equivalent of \$20,000 in today's money, so the servants are given sums ranging from \$100,000 to \$20,000. The first two servants invest the money and get a good return on their investment. The third simply buries the one talent he has received, expecting to be able to hand it back to a master he

believes to be "a hard man, reaping where he has not sown and gathering where he has not scattered."

The parable emphasises the long interval between the master's departure and his return. As we saw last week, this suggests that the point of the parable will be how the members of the church respond to the absence of their Lord. The reckoning of accounts follows a simple pattern: each servant brings what he was given and what he has made by investing the money. The first two servants are praised and promised even greater share in their master's good fortune. The meeting with the third servant is the longest. He begins by telling his master how he tried to be careful with what he was given. With something of a flourish of self-congratulation, he now produces it, expecting to be praised for his prudence. It comes as a shock to him that instead of praise, he receives abuse. He is called "wicked and lazy". His one talent is given to the man

with five and he is ordered to be "cast out into the darkness where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth."

Like other parables in Matthew, this is a story of a tragic miscalculation. The servant with the one talent is an adult male equivalent of the five girls. It is hard not to feel some pity for an individual who is so paralysed by fear that he fails to make the most of the opportunities that are offered him. The parable closes with those chilling signals of final loss that are so common in Matthew – being cast into darkness and the grinding of teeth.

TODAY'S READINGS

PROV 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31; 1 THESS 5:1-5
MATTHEW 25:14-30

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SOLEMNITY OF
CHRIST THE KING

ARE YOU READY?

The story in today's Gospel closes Jesus' final great teaching discourse. While not specifically called a parable, it comes as the climax of the series of parables of the end times. It is in many respects a sort of a key to them and to other aspects of Jesus' teaching in this Gospel.

It begins with a majestic scene describing the return of the Son of Man in glory. Within a few days, Jesus will end his earthly life in the pain and humiliation of the passion. After the Resurrection, he will depart unobtrusively, bidding farewell to his own in the relative obscurity of a hillside in Galilee. His return, however, will be glorious, escorted by angels to take his seat for judgment. Before him, all the nations are gathered. Like a shepherd at evening, he separates sheep from goats. The two speeches addressed to those on either side are substantially the same: what is different is the reaction of those to whom they are addressed.

The first group are the 'sheep': the Bible takes a positive view of sheep. The message addressed to them is positive: they are blessed by the Father, a place has been prepared for them in the Kingdom since the foundation of the world. They have passed six vital tests: they have fed the king when he was hungry, given drink to him when he was thirsty, welcomed him when he was a stranger, clothed him when he was naked or visited him when he was the sick or in prison. Christian tradition adds another act, the burial of the dead, to make these the 'seven corporal works of mercy'. This comes as a surprise to them. They have no memory of ever having served the king in any of these ways. He reminds them that as long as they did it to the least, the most vulnerable of his brothers and sisters they did it to him.

The next group to be addressed are those on the left. The same test is applied to them, but they have failed it. Again, this is news to them: they have never seen the king in any kind of need, but in failing their weak brothers and sisters, they failed the king. The scene ends with the two groups going their separate ways – the goats to eternal punishment and the just ones to eternal life.

The parables of the end times have spoken continuously about the need to be ready for the mysterious coming of the Son of Man. It is now clear what readiness means. Jesus' first sermon on a hillside in Galilee began by proclaiming beatitudes that would distinguish his disciples. His last sermon, on a hill overlooking Jerusalem, ends by enumerating six works of mercy that are a perfect match for the beatitudes. Matthew is a practical teacher, transforming the ideal into the practical. To quote St John of the Cross, "in the evening of life, we shall be judged on love."

TODAY'S READINGS

EZEK 34:11-12, 15-17; 1 COR 15:20-26, 28; MATTHEW 25:31-46