

"THE LONG EXPECTED JESUS"
December 10, 1989

TEXT: Matthew 25:19 "Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them."

Some of you may be wondering about now whether I have lost my mind or just my calendar. After all, here it is the second Sunday in Advent. We know that because there are two Advent candles on the altar. Count them. One. Two. The second Sunday in Advent, and yet here I am preaching on the parable of the talents. Now, we all know this is a text for Stewardship Sunday, not Advent. And our stewardship drive is over.

Or is it? Our pledge drive is over, but real stewardship is a year-round thing. And, for that reason, this morning's scripture is more fitting than you may know. More fitting than all those traditional stories of shepherds or wise men. More fitting than the prophecies of Isaiah, or whatever else is read this time of year. Fitting because it speaks of something that was once at the heart of our faith. Something which, in our day, is too often forgotten.

That something is this. You and I are stewards. Stewards of an absent Master. If you look at the first chapter of Acts, verse nine, you will find these words: "When He had said this, as they were looking on, He was lifted up, and a cloud took Him out of their sight." Or, as Jesus put it in this morning's scripture, "For it will be as when a man going on a journey, called his servants and entrusted to them his property . . . Then he went away."

We are stewards of an absent Master. That is why our Advent season features hymns like "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus" and "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Like every Christian since the Ascension, you and I live, and worship, and serve in the absence of our Master. That may seem obvious enough, but for those who truly seek to follow Christ, it poses difficult problems. What does He want us to do? How can we be sure? How can we find the wisdom and the strength to do them?

In the earliest days of the Church, those problems were not as hard as they are now. Some of those early Christians had actually seen Jesus. Many, at least, knew someone else who had seen Him. Someone who vividly remembered His personality, His gentleness, His love, His absolute faith. It was those memories that helped them live as Jesus taught.

We, on the other hand, are quite removed from that kind of personal experience. We only have a book. A book in which we can read some of the things which Jesus said and did. And that is better than nothing, of course. But, when things get tough, it helps us less than strong personal memories. How much easier it might be if we had actually seen Him. If we had heard Him speak. If we had known Him, had experienced for ourselves His own unforgettable Spirit. Jesus recognized that when He said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." (John 20:29)

The second thing that made it easier for the early Christians was their faith that Jesus would return again during their own lifetime. For them, every day was Advent. Their constant prayer was "Maranatha," which meant "Come, O Lord." They were so convinced of His imminent return that they did not even try to write down His story. Why bother when He would be coming back at almost any time. For the same reason, they put their goods in common. They wanted everyone to have enough until Jesus came again. Some even stopped working and just sat around waiting. And Paul had to write to the Thessalonians, "If anyone will not work, let him not eat." (II Thessalonians 3:10)

Once again our situation is different. We are used to waiting. Perhaps too used to it. We sing "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus," but the truth is that many may not mean it. Many do not really expect Him to come. Some may not even want Him to. They may find His absence a bit too convenient. There is a saying, "While the cat's away, the mice will play." And, as long as Christ is safely out of sight, we are free to do as we please. Free to go through the motions of religion, without letting it get too real.

Sociologists of religion tell us that in Christ's prolonged absence, a kind of pseudo-religion has developed in certain quarters. "Civic religion" they call it. It has all the trappings of the real thing, but very little of its substance. And none of its power. Still, it lets us think of ourselves as good people. And, by careful editing, it offers the comforts of faith with none of its demands. Like the Jews at the foot of Mount Sinai, we have a golden calf to worship. And, as long as Moses stays on the mountain, as long as Christ's coming is safely off in the unknown future, some would gladly keep it that way.

I confess it would be easy to pander to such pseudo-faith. To speak only of things which happened long time ago and far away. Things that make us feel warm and cozy inside, like shepherds, and wise men, and angels praising God and singing. That is what many people want. And one way to be liked is to tell people what they want to hear. It would be easy. But it would be letting you down as well as God. There will be plenty of time for the message of Christmas in weeks to come. But now is the time for the message of Advent. In this morning's scripture, Jesus said, "Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled

accounts with them." (Matthew 25:19) Sooner or later "The Long Expected Jesus" (or should I say, "The Unexpected Jesus") returns.

I do not pretend to know just how that will happen. Perhaps He will actually come in a cloud of glory as the Bible says. Or perhaps it will be some life situation for which we will find ourselves either prepared or unprepared. Perhaps we will just go to Him in death. But, one way or another, I am convinced that we are all accountable for ourselves and our stewardship.

The question is, "Will we be ready?" Some, like those faithful servants, will be able to say, "Master, you delivered to me these talents. And I have used them to the best of my ability. Here's the return on your investment." Some like the foolish servant, will find themselves stammering, "Lord, you were gone so long. We thought you weren't ever coming! So we did what seemed good to us and just tried not to hurt anyone." In which group will we be?

If so, He may answer: "I warned you it would be like this. And, besides, each year you had Advent to remind you. Why did you use it only for the trappings of Christmas?" There is Grace, to be sure. But we are still accountable. Our God loves us enough to make us responsible. It is what makes us truly human. That is the message of Advent. Amid the pressures and joys of the season, let us not forget that, like Jesus, we, too, are called to be about our Father's business.

And how do we handle that. By understanding who and what we are. Stewards and not masters. God has put us here for a purpose, and not just to have a good time. If we can not see, or hear, or touch Him, then we shall just have to be better stewards. If He is not here to tell us what to do, or how to do it, then we shall have to find that direction somewhere else: in His written word, in the part of Himself He has put into each of us, in the lives of those around us. And what better time to begin than now, when the beauty and the memories, and the joys of the season can make us so responsive. Charles Dickens began his Tale of Two Cities with these words: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." And the same could be said of these weeks before Christmas. We can let them make us hassled, or depressed, or angry. Or we can let them open our hearts to the Spirit of Christ. It is our choice. But it may be a better choice if we remember our Master's words: "after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them." (Matthew 25:19)