

The Church's Vision

Matthew 25:14-30

November 13, 2011

I.

Sometimes as I begin preaching I'm reminded of the young girl who went to church for the first time, and later was asked how she liked it. She said, "The music was nice, the prayers were good, but the commercial was too long."

That shouldn't happen today because this sermon will be a little shorter than usual. After I finish, Paul Montjoy will come up and speak to you, not about stewardship as you might expect at this time of year, but rather about our St. Thomas Roundtable.

I referred earlier to the bulletin insert inviting you to our Roundtable meeting next Wednesday. We are having an in-depth discussion about what God is calling St. Thomas to do and to be, and we urge you all to participate.

But before continuing about the Roundtable, I might set the stage by mentioning one of my favorite books, a short and snappy little satire by C.S. Lewis titled *The Screwtape Letters*. It is a series of letters from a senior demon named Screwtape to his nephew, a junior apprentice demon named Wormwood.

Wormwood, it seems, has been charged with the task of tempting and corrupting a person know only as "The Patient." Screwtape's letters offer advice on how to cleverly undermine the patient's faith so that he does not realize what's happening. And from time to time Screwtape also offers observations on human nature and Christian doctrine.

At one point, Screwtape says, "Wormwood, the church is fertile field if you keep them bickering over details, structure, money, property, personal hurts and misunderstandings. One thing you must prevent, don't ever let Christians look up and see the banner of victory flying, because you'll lose them. Never let them see the glory of God."

I think St. Thomas would be a big disappointment for Screwtape. We get along well, we care for each other, and our recent survey confirms that our worship strengthens our faith and deepens our spirituality. We do look to the glory of God.

And our Roundtable meetings began on that spiritual note. The first two meetings in July were devoted to our risen Lord's teachings on the seven churches of the Book of Revelation. We explored how Christ's words apply to today's church in general, and ourselves in particular. And during all of our meetings our prayer team comes right in here and prays the entire time.

So, the Roundtable is a serious undertaking. Between now and the end of January we will offer a vision for St. Thomas for the next few years, along with recommendations on how to implement that vision. The plan is to present it all to our annual parish meeting on January 29. So I urge you to give Paul your attention when he speaks, and to come to the meetings.

II.

And for now, we might consider today's Gospel reading as guidance for the church and the Roundtable. We heard about three servants who were trustworthy enough in the beginning to hold their master's money. But when the master returned and asked for his money back, there was good news and bad news.

Two of the servants pleased their master because they had doubled his money. Don't we wish we had financial advisers like that?

But the third servant incurred the master's wrath, not because he spent the money but because he merely preserved it. He kept what he had, but gained nothing. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if there had been a fourth servant who took his master's money to the casino and lost it all. Perhaps that's a sermon for another time.

Obviously, we once again are dealing with symbolism. Once again, the master here is Jesus. And his return to obtain an accounting from the servants once again represents his coming again to establish God's kingdom. We heard this theme last week in the story of the ten bridesmaids.

But today's reading is a little different. In the past we have spoken about how Jesus' second coming relates to us individually, and our own obligation to be ready. Today's reading, however, can speak to the church and its collective obligation to fulfill our Lord's purpose by carrying on his work. And this, of course, ties in to the work of the Roundtable.

III.

We start with knowledge that the church is the body Christ left behind, and of which we all are members. The Bible tells us that, the Creeds tell us that, and the Catechism tells us that.

But Jesus did not intend for the church to be passive or to do nothing. The church is called to do what Jesus did; to make things better and improve upon the situation. We strive do that in worship, in bringing people to faith, and by extending Christ's love into the world. That's our job.

And today's reading describes the future consequences of success and failure. Just as the two servants who dealt faithfully with their master's property were blessed, so also the church that faithfully carries out Christ's work will be blessed.

The other result is equally apparent. The servant who did nothing, and let things ride, was rejected by the master and condemned to the outer darkness. And churches that do not teach the Gospel and turn away from the authority of scripture will experience the same condemnation.

And here we should note the master's final prophetic words. He said, "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."

This could seem unfair if taken literally, couldn't it? After all, the Bible teaches us to share what we have with the less fortunate. But Jesus was talking about something else. His point was that our faith, and our gifts, and our work to advance God's kingdom, will multiply as we use them to do God's will.

And the other side of the coin is that those who fail to use what God has given them in the ways God wants will lose even what they have. These are the blessings and woes of active faith and passive indifference.

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel Jesus said, "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a basket, but on its stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (5:15-16).

That's what Jesus wants the church to be. It is what he wants St. Thomas to be. We have been given the light of the Gospel, and we are called to let it shine. As we do that our faith and our works will be received by others, who in turn can spread them even further.

And that can mean acting in faith. It can mean doing what God wants us to do, not completely sure of where it will lead us, but trusting that if the Holy Spirit goes before us we cannot fail.

We are not called to be like the servant who angered his master by playing it safe, but rather like the servants who entered into the master's joy by probably taking some risks.

Let's go back to our earlier C.S. Lewis example about Screwtape and Wormwood for a moment. What advice do you think Screwtape would give to Wormwood if the "patient" were a church rather than a person? He probably would say, "Get them to play it safe. Keep them focused on themselves. Don't let them trust in God. Discourage them from stepping out in faith."

And that's one of the pitfalls that churches face, isn't it? It is the temptation to limit the church's vision to only what it knows it can accomplish within its own capabilities rather than following a vision that trusts in God to help along the way. But a vision that does not need God in order to succeed probably is not much of a vision, and will not inspire people to do very much.

IV.

So, how does this affect us, and the work the Roundtable will complete in January? Over the years I believe St. Thomas has been a good and faithful servant trying to multiply God's blessings.

And even though we certainly have had some adventures that the Roundtable reviewed in your bulletin inserts a few weeks ago, I believe the people of St. Thomas always have tried to find and follow God's will for our community of faith here in Diamondhead.

It really does come down to all of us who sit in these pews. The Catechism of the church in the Prayer Book says, "The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members." All of us, together, are the church.

Today's Gospel was a story about Jesus' return. But until then, we as the church are called to do his work. I pray that our vision always is grounded in that reality.

And I would direct our attention to the words of St. Theresa of Avila, a sixteenth century nun known for her contemplative writings. She recognized that even though Christ's spirit is here among us, it is up to us to take him into the world in the name of the church. She said:

Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

And so, our risen Lord calls us to do in the world now what he did when he walked among us. And the church is the way he left for us to do it until he comes again. It is up to us to be his hands, and his feet, and to be his body. *Amen.*