

PREGO EXTRA

Background notes
for the Gospels of
NOVEMBER 2011
Year A



31st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 23: 1-12
Jesus denounces Scribes and Pharisees

Today's passage concludes the section on conflict stories which we have been reading in the past few weeks and introduces the discourse concerned with the end of the world. Matthew is writing for the new Christian Palestinian church after the fall of Jerusalem (70 AD).

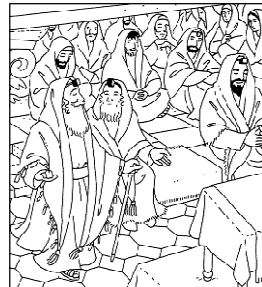
Addressing the people and his disciples.

As far as we can tell, this discourse is not spoken in front of Pharisees and Scribes. The audience seems to have been similar to the one of the Sermon on the Mount.

The Scribes and the Pharisees

They are often the target of violent criticism. They are two different groups of people; the Pharisees are a devout group of Jews who pride themselves in observing the Law to the letter. In Matthew's time they constituted the dominant Jewish group; of course, not all Pharisees will have been guilty of the hypocrisy or vanity described in this passage.

The Scribes belong to a learned administrative class, their work is associated with the Temple. As their name implies, they spend a lot of time copying the sacred texts and reading and explaining them to the people. At a time where most people were illiterate and few copies of the Torah existed, their role in society was very important. Many Scribes were in fact also Pharisees.



The Chair of Moses

Scribes would stand to read the Law but sit to interpret it. In this text it can also be seen as a metaphor for the origin of the authority of the Scribes to teach: it can be traced back to Moses and mount Sinai. There is no historical basis for this belief.

Do what they tell you

Jesus here is not criticising the Pharisees' and Scribes' teaching. His main problem is their hypocrisy. They do not practise what they preach.

The sheep and the goats

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus uses the familiar imagery of the work of the shepherd continuing the theme of today's first reading, Ezek.34:11-12.15-17.

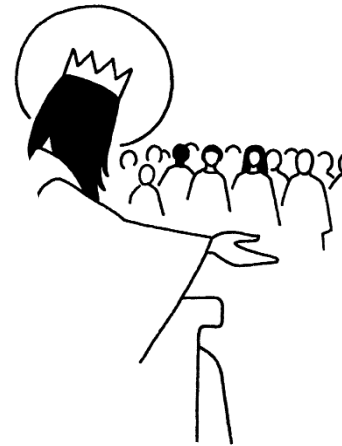


Jesus vividly describes how the King will divide the nations into two types of people; the 'blessed' and the 'cursed', also referring to them as sheep and goats.

The King's standard of judgement.

Jesus clearly details what the King requires of his people if they are to become citizens of his Kingdom. It is notable that none of the attributes required are religious in nature, nor is there any mention of commandments or laws being kept or broken.

His listeners both the 'sheep' and the 'goats', are surprised by the criteria Jesus presents to them. Both types of people have failed to recognise that what they have done for others, they have actually done for God, their Lord and King. The love they have withheld from others they have in fact withheld from God.



It is to the attitude of people that our attention is drawn. The blessed are loving to others without any thought of self. Those addressed as cursed are in effect saying that if they had known the one in need of help was God and not some insignificant person, then they would have acted differently.

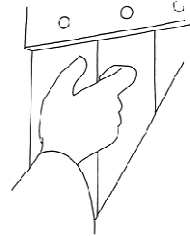
The 'cursed' who were condemned had done nothing morally wrong, rather they had done nothing at all.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids

During the last three weeks of liturgical year A, we focus on three parables from Matthew's Gospel. Each one provides us with an image of the end of time, reminding us that Christ will come again; though we do not know the day or the time.

Lord, Lord, open the doors for us.

Today, Jesus, in his final discourse in Matthew's gospel, returns to a theme contained in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said; *'Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom...but only the one who does the will of my father. (Mt 7.21)* Jesus refers to the one who listens to His words and acts on them, as *'sensible'*, but to the one who only listens to them as *'stupid'*. (vv.24-27)



The bridegroom's answer to the foolish virgins in today's Gospel story is, *'I do not know you'*. Jesus concludes the parable with the warning, *'Stay awake for you know neither the day nor the hour.'* (vv.12.13)

Palestinian matrimonial customs.

In Jesus' time, weddings took place long after the betrothal. On the wedding day, when a suitable agreement had been reached regarding the dowry, the best man would send for the groom to come and fetch his bride from her father's house, and take her to his own. This constituted the ceremony of marriage.

On the groom's arrival the wedding party would then make the journey to his house by the longest possible route. The whole village turned out to wish them well and to accompany them on the way. There is a Jewish saying *'From six to sixty will follow the marriage drum'*. The Rabbis agreed that a man might even abandon the study of the Law to share in the joy of a wedding feast.

In the scriptures the wedding feast represented eternal salvation.

I hid your talents in the ground

Rabbis of the time commend burial of money as a good way of protecting it. There was no inflation, so it was a prudent course of action.

A question of fear and trust

A possible reading of this parable could focus on questions of fear and trust.

The first and second servant are rewarded not so much for what they have done but for their absolute trust in their master. Investing money always involves a risk which they were prepared to take. The third servant, on the other hand, is full of fear and seeks to keep the little he has at all cost.

I had heard you were a hard man

One of the reasons for his fear comes from his opinion of the Master whom he sees as a harsh, calculating judge.



In this parable, Matthew shows that living a life of anxiety and fear, rather than trust and love, has a paralysing effect and leads to losing everything.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth

This is a favourite expression of Matthew's which he uses several times to allude to the torments of hell. Many find these harsh words not in keeping with an all-merciful God. One possible explanation might be the desire to jolt people into reflecting on their own values by showing extreme situations and their consequences.

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 25: 14-30
The parable of the talents

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This parable is the companion piece to last week's parable of the ten bridesmaids. Its purpose is to show the disciples how they are to live while they wait for the end of time and the return of Jesus.

The man on his way abroad

In him, we can see Jesus being away from the Ascension til his return for the second coming.

He entrusted his property to them

We can recognise ourselves in the servants of the story. God has entrusted each one of us with a part of his fortune.

A long time after, the master came back

Early Christians' lives had been very affected by the fall of Jerusalem (70AD); it felt to them as if the end of the world was imminent. Matthew indicates here that the second coming is not at hand.



A talent

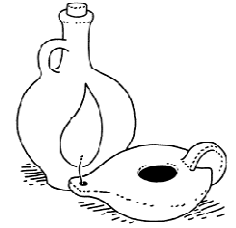
This is an enormous sum of money. One talent is equivalent to 6000 denarii and one denarius is a day's wage for a servant.

In Matthew's time the word talent is strictly a unit for volume or money and has no link with ability.



No one was allowed on the streets after dark without a lighted lamp, and so the party made the long journey by torchlight. They went on their way singing and dancing.

When a couple married they did not go away on honeymoon, but stayed at home for a week long celebration. Apparently locking the doors was a cumbersome event and no late comers were admitted.



Stay awake!

The best man (some say the groom) would go to the bride's house to discuss the dowry with her father. The negotiations could be a long and intricate process, and no one knew for sure when the groom would be coming for his bride. It could be some time after sunset, or even on another day. The bridegroom was obliged to send a man along the street to herald his arrival. The groom in Matthews story had been delayed and all ten virgins had fallen asleep; the foolish and the wise. They were the bridesmaids and had an important role to play. Some scholars see the command to 'stay awake' as an addition to Matthew's traditional material and that the importance lies rather in the need to be prepared.



Despite falling asleep the wise virgins were adequately prepared for the privileged task they had agreed to carry out. If they had given some of their oil to the five who were unprepared, none of them might have made the journey in time for the celebrations.

The Jews were unprepared.

This parable has a local meaning but also a wider universal one. It was directed against the Jews. They were the chosen people; their whole history was to have been a preparation for the coming of the Son of God; but they were unprepared for his arrival.

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