

The Last Sunday of the Church Year
November 22, 2009

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✠ Jesu juva ✠

NO LONGER IN DARKNESS

Isaiah 65:17-25; I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:1-13

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

The End is near!" Whenever one hears this little sentence, you think of the crazy person on the street with a billboard, shouting about it at the top of their lungs; or the same sort of person in a cartoon of some sort saying the end of something is about to happen. But today we are given this warning by the two of the chief figures in the New Testament: St. Paul, and our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, neither of which were crazy, and neither of whom did so in order to be funny.

No, their message is a serious one. Jesus tells us: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming." And St. Paul says: "you yourselves know perfectly well that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape."

Yes, on that last great day of our Lord's return, many will find themselves unprepared and without a way of escape from the destruction, both temporal and eternal that will be ushered in all at once that day. One ancient Anglo-Saxon homily describes it as "the day of miseries, and the day of hardships, and the day of sadness, and the day of cries, and the day of lamentation, and the day of suffering and the day of sorrow and the dark day... There the sinful then might wish that they were never brought forth by their fathers and mothers" (Vercelli Homily II).



And it will not only be the unbelieving world that is caught unprepared, but also many in the Church, who have been baptized and lived among us as fellow Christians, who will be caught unprepared. Our Lord in His parable today draws a distinction between wise and foolish virgins who are awaiting the coming of the Bridegroom. Five are wise and five are foolish. But they are all virgins! They have all been dedicated to a life of purity and of faith. They are all waiting, at least at first. He does not say

there were five virgins and five harlots; but that they were all virgins. And so the division that is made here between the wise and foolish is one made in the Church and not outside of it.

And so this warning to be prepared for the end, for Christ our Lord's return, is for you, the Christians! And this is why St. Paul today says: "But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness." The lifestyle of sin and unbelieving ignorance is the darkness of which St. Paul speaks, a darkness from which you were rescued when Christ, who is the light of the world, came to you by His Word through the waters of Holy Baptism. There He enlightened your darkness and cast it out with His own glorious light. And now you are called a son of light and a son of the day according to Paul, for in this Sacrament and by faith you have put on Christ; for as St. John says of Christ in His gospel: "That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world." And again Jesus says: "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." And St. Paul in Ephesians exhorts you: "you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light."

You are no longer in darkness. You have been rescued from sin and from death by Christ Jesus who died and rose again to enlighten and save you. And He has sent you His Holy Word, that you may know all that you must, so that you may be prepared at last to enter with all of the saints into Heaven; so that you will be prepared, knowing that the end is always near, and that the Bridegroom will come. And so, you are to live according to the faith and knowledge that has been given you. St. Paul says: "Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation."

The foolish virgins in the parable fell asleep and failed to tend to their lamps. The unbelieving who will not escape judgment are characterized by St. Paul as being asleep and being drunk. And you are not to be like them. Do not allow yourself to be lulled into sleep or drunk with the delusion that judgment will be forever delayed. For the coming of Christ will be sudden and His judgment inescapable. And so Jesus says "Watch." St. Paul says be awake and sober and well armed.

And the Lord loves you so greatly that He tells you ahead of time how these things will be. He does not want you to be overtaken by them unawares. As St. Paul again says: "God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him." And so He also gives what you need in order to be prepared. And what was needed in the parable of the virgins? Oil for their lamps; the substance that keeps their lights burning bright, that keeps them from

being thrust again into darkness. This oil is the grace of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is the metal of which the armor St. Paul speaks of, the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of the hope of salvation, is forged.

This grace is active in you through your baptism. There you were enlightened and forgiven and made new; but that which was given continues its work in you once it has been received, so that baptism does not become simply a historical fact, but rather that which determines our ongoing reality and empowers it even now after the fact of its reception.

And what is given in Baptism is also being strengthened by Christ through the Word you now hear, and every time you hear it. So when you encounter this Word, or rather when the Word encounters you, do not be asleep to it, or drunkenly hostile or numb to it. Do not be like the foolish virgins who appeared to be dedicated, but paid no attention to their lamps! But listen soberly and attentively, seeking the grace that Christ gives in it. Hear it and be strengthened in your spirit and in faith. And put on, so to speak, that which is spoken to you, so that your armor will be strengthened and your hope increased.

And come to the Supper. Here your Lord has set for you a table of the finest heavenly food, a food which yes gives forgiveness of your sins, but also gives you eternal life and a glimpse past the end of the old and into the new.

For you see, to the faithful, the coming of Christ is not about terror and destruction (though destruction will occur) but about the start of something new, something wonderful. "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, and her people for joy." The faithful virgins, after all, do not cower in fear, but go into the wedding feast, escorting the Bridegroom. They enter into the new heavens and the new earth where Christ's light shines eternally and where lamps are no longer needed because there is no darkness. And in a certain sense they have come to the place where they have always belonged, ever since they were baptized. For in Holy Baptism you were born anew; made a part of the new heavens and new earth in anticipation of the End. And in the supper you are given to eat the meal of the new covenant, a meal which is celebrated in the new Jerusalem with all the saints and with Christ Himself who is present and revealed in the meal.

Indeed for you, O Christians, the end has always been near, and you have a part both in it and in what comes next. And though the world may think you crazy for it; what you hear today and what you have believed and confessed is true. So be prepared, for the best is yet to come, when the Bridegroom returns and brings us, lamps a-glow, armor on, with Him; may He come quickly. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠

