

NOT THE TIME BUT THE TASK

Scripture Reading: Luke 15:3-10, RSV

Some years ago I attended a meeting in Chicago of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature. I was surprised when I read the program and found that there was going to be a consultation on the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. It was my impression that scholars wouldn't touch the Moonies movement with a 10-foot pole. I was even more shocked to find that the list of participants included some of the finest American scholars. I learned later that the Moonies had arranged for this and paid a significant amount of money for the privilege.

The keynote speaker was an individual who had formerly taught at Harvard University and who was then teaching in Canada. In his address he made the comment that the most vexing problem facing the church today is the delay of the Advent. He said that he had read theology from A to Z and the one who gives the best solution to the problem of the delay of the Advent (or Parousia) is the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. I was astonished. A number of other people at the meetings agreed that this is a most perplexing problem but they certainly didn't agree that the Reverend Moon had provided the solution.

It is still the most vexing problem. Historically the church has moved between the extreme of believing that Christ's Second Coming was right around the corner to the extreme of believing that it is so far off in the future it shouldn't affect our current lives.

The longest discourse on the Second Coming is in Matthew 24 and 25, and it is also the most fascinating. Here Jesus is explicitly asked when he is coming back. What is the sign that the end of the age is near, that these gigantic blocks of stone making up the temple will not be left one upon the other? In these two chapters Matthew presents Jesus' answer to this question. Jesus begins by telling them to be careful that they are not led astray—there will be false Christs and false prophets. He goes on to say that the believers will hear of a general international deterioration—politics will become very violent. Jesus encourages them, however, by telling them not to be alarmed because the end is not yet. He tells that natural disasters will occur—famines, earthquakes, etc. These disasters will be only the beginning of sorrows. There will be persecution. In the 14th verse Jesus says, "And then this gospel of the kingdom will be preached to all the world and the end will come."

In the next section of Matthew 24, he goes on to say that his coming will be worldwide. In with the talk of the Second Coming, Jesus mixes imagery references to the fall of Jerusalem. (Josephus' account of the fall gives a vivid account of the horror of the destruction of Jerusalem.) Later in the chapter Jesus lets us know that his coming will not be a private one: it will be a cosmic, universal one. "There will be signs in the heavens—the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give her light, etc." He ends by saying (verses 32-34), "When you see these things, know that my coming is near, even at the doors."

He is trying desperately to give an answer to them. "These are the things that will tell you that my coming is near." But then he starts to do some different things. In verse 36 he tells them, "In that day and hour no man knoweth, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but my Father only."

He tells them about Noah. In his time people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. Life was normal. They did not know until the day came; most people were ignoring the signs of the flood. The same will be true of the Second Coming. Up until now Jesus has been explicit about

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the signs, but now he tells them that only God knows the exact time. In verse 44 he says, “Therefore, you must be ready, for the Son of man comes in an hour you do not expect.” This message began to be confusing to the disciples. First they were told what the signs would be of the coming; then Jesus tells them he will come when he is unexpected. That is why he emphasized that they must be ready at all times.

Jesus then begins to tell them the story of the parable of the master who gives tasks to his servants and then goes on an extended trip. According to Jesus, the implication of the parable is that we, as servants of God, must not ever say, “My Master is delayed.” You must do the tasks you have been given to do, irrespective of the time of the Second Coming.

The parable of the 10 maidens in chapter 25 continues the theme. Jesus wants us to see in the preceding parable that if we behave or act on the basis of a delay of Christ’s coming, we have made a serious mistake. Then in the parable of the 10 virgins Jesus tells us to expect a delay. The five foolish virgins were foolish because they failed to take extra oil. The wise virgins took the oil; they were prepared for the delay. The very clear answer with which Jesus began is now getting more and more muddy; the time of his coming is becoming more obscure. He ends the parable of the 10 maidens by saying, “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” (Matt. 25:13.)

Jesus went on to tell the parable of the talents:

For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property. (Matt. 25:14)

It is interesting in this latter parable that the emphasis is on what people do and not the time of Christ’s coming. The only reference in the parable to time is verse 19: “Now after a *long* [italics supplied] time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.” How do you think Jesus’ disciples responded to that phrase? In writing this Matthew is trying to deal with the problem of the delay of the Second Coming. This book was written more than 30 years after Jesus had returned to heaven. The disciples had expected Jesus to come back much sooner. They were watching a generation pass away.

In this parable the focus is on the fact that some people do what the master tells them to do and some don’t. It also focuses on one servant who is too afraid to take risks; he was so conservative that he didn’t earn even a penny for interest. It was a time when interest rates were quite high at the financial institutions of the day, but he wouldn’t even deposit the funds to earn interest.

Matthew 25, verses 31 to the end of the chapter, presents the end of Jesus’ response and the famous judgment scene. The Son of Man has come in his glory. Before him all the nations of the earth are gathered.

He will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed

me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee?”...And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:32-40)

We need to recapitulate: The disciples began by asking him when he was coming again. He listed a number of signs and said, “When you see these signs fulfilled, know that it is near, even at the doors.” Then he tells them no man knows the exact day and hour, only the Father. He goes on to say that “if you act as if there is a delay, you will be condemned, but you should expect a delay.”

“What I want you to think about, disciples, is that my going away is like a man who leaves an investment behind him, and I want you to invest what I have given you. I want you to double, triple or quadruple it in my absence.”

As Jesus speaks the time of his coming becomes increasingly obscure, but the task we have been given to do becomes increasingly clear. The whole message shifts from, ‘These are the signs of my coming,’ to ‘These are the things I want you to do while I am gone.’ There is a natural progression. Jesus wants us to understand that there may be a delay, but we should keep on working.

In this last scene of the judgment, he puts the last nail in the whole structure. In a roundabout way, Jesus says, “Disciples, I want you to understand that the question you have asked is fundamentally the wrong question. Disciples, you have asked that question because you have a major misconception about me. You are picturing me as leaving the world and coming back. Disciples, I am not leaving the world. I am present in the world. I am going to be visible in the needs and suffering of men and women. If you clothe the naked, feed the hungry and give water to the thirsty. Disciples, you will be ministering directly to me. I am not gone, coming back. I am here!”

What Jesus is saying is that the “Second Coming is making manifest the fact that I have always been here. I now rule the world. Everything has shifted from the time to the task. Disciples, I want you to visit me in prison. I want you to feed me when I am hungry. That is my concern about the Second Coming.”

This was a gentle way to tell the disciples that they were totally off base. The fact of the matter is that you and I are both human and we are consumed with curiosity: When is he going to come back? It is a burning human desire within us. We’re talking about an unparalleled event that will change history.

There is a clue in Matthew 24:14 that is picked up by other New Testament writers as an explanation for the delay. It’s fine for Jesus to tell the disciples to be prepared for a delay, but it’s another thing to understand why there is a delay. God’s purposes don’t change. God doesn’t adjust his time tables. The early church tended to fasten on this text: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come.” That is why Peter in saying, “A day is a thousand years and a thousand years is as a day,” is telling us that the Lord is longsuffering to us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. The gospel has yet to be preached sufficiently.

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Within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we have been very clear about the Second Advent. We have had to wrestle with the problem of a delay. We have said that the work of the gospel in the world cannot be finished unless it is finished in the church. In a real sense the gospel has never been proclaimed in the church. People are not responding to it (or are not understanding) as they should.

There is another side to that. Not only must the gospel be preached; the gospel must be heard. With the analysis of communications in the 20th century, we have learned that the conditions must be right to hear what people are saying. You can't get up and make a speech and expect everyone to hear you. What are you really saying?

At the first advent of Christ, that was a real problem also. As Bob Zamora pointed out earlier today in the Sabbath School lesson, it took the Jews a great deal of time to begin to understand completely what Jesus was trying to tell them. He had to say it repeatedly and in variegated ways. It was not easy to understand. What we are trying to say today is not so easy or so obvious in many respects. When Christ came the first time, there was a universal language. There was a government that had stabilized the world. There was a very real sense of frustration and anxiety and people were looking for a deliverer. Many people believe that some, if not all, of these conditions exist today. It won't be very long before every individual in this world will be out of the primitive stage and into the developed stage. Communications will be available. We have a sense of anxiety and fear in the 20th century about the future that we have never had before in human history—it is called the nuclear bomb. There doesn't seem to be any way out.

Politicians these days have interesting comments to make—after they have left office. The memoirs of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon and books about the Kennedy years all express enormous frustrations at the fact that they couldn't really do anything. They make some difference but they feel that events have surged past them and they really can't control them.

In the last part of my sermon, I have been seduced by the time of the Second Coming. I speculate on it; you speculate on it. But the message of Matthew 24 and 25 is clear: Don't let it seduce you too much. It is not the time. It is the task! With that, those of us who believe passionately in the Second Coming can continue to work with fervor, enthusiasm and zeal. The focus simply has to shift. It is not the time, but the event!