

The Twenty-Fifth Sunday of Pentecost

November 6, 2005

Amos 5:18-24

Psalm 70

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“How long, O Lord, how long?” That’s a plaintive cry from what we know as the Old Testament – a cry of the Jewish people awaiting the Messiah – awaiting the Day of the Lord. That will be the day, in their eyes, when everything will be made right – all will be perfect.

But not for everyone – not if you believe Amos. Amos says that will be a day of gloom and darkness. It will be a day of judgment. Judgment is not a popular word – not a popular idea – but it’s with us and always has been. Somewhere in the back of our minds there is always the idea that someone – God – sees our thoughts and actions and sort of weighs us in a balance. That, of course, is why we are so good at making excuses. I sincerely doubt that God believes most of our excuses, but we can hope.

In the back of our minds is the idea that ultimately we are going to be answerable for our lives. Amos tells us that God will make that judgment on how we have practiced justice and mercy. That’s another way of saying, “love God and love your neighbor as yourself.” If we can honestly say that we have tried to live that way, we will be judged righteous and have admission to His Kingdom. If not, here we are.

Paul makes it more graphic, more picturesque. Of course in Paul's day that "How long, O Lord" had stretched on for years and years, and whole generations of Christians that really expected the Messiah – Jesus – to return right away were dying. The question in Paul's day was what about them. What if they are in the earth and cannot be present to answer for themselves?

Paul assures them. First, God knows the hearts and minds of all, living and dead, and second, those who have been righteous and practiced justice and mercy in this life will be raised to that new life with Jesus to meet Him in the clouds. Raised first – then those who are living at that moment will join them, and all will find eternal life with Jesus. Those that are left, are left.

Of course the temptation in the age of Amos, and in the time of Paul, was to procrastinate. Thank heaven we no longer do that.

The idea was and is, that there will always be time in the days to come when we can change our lives. If we have not been righteous, there will be time to mend our ways. We can practice justice and mercy in time for the Big Day and thereby join the saints in the clouds. It really is a comforting thought, isn't it? However it doesn't quite seem to be what Jesus is saying in our Gospel.

Those foolish maidens just know that there's no hurry – they can buy that oil later – right now they are busy. Then, when the time comes – and it comes suddenly and completely without warning – the oil store is closed: it's too late.

What is Jesus really talking about? Obviously, it's not oil and lamps. He's talking about commitment – commitment to a life in which justice and mercy will be the center. The oil is commitment. It's not to be taken lightly. It can't run out and be replaced. It can't be borrowed. Commitment is that which prepares us – you and me – to receive Our Lord Jesus Christ and to take our place by Him in His Kingdom.

Without that commitment we might well say “How long, O Lord” with fear and trembling. With it, we say that with joyful expectation.

In His Holy Name.