

Sermon on 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time 8 November, 2020

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Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

I always go home by taxi from the airport when I return to Auckland from Hong Kong, where I visit my mother every summer. A few years ago, when I took a taxi home after an 11-hour flight, I met an extremely friendly and talkative taxi driver who insisted on sharing his life experience. And the life experience he shared was Lotto, Lotto and Lotto. He talked about his experience of winning, and offered explicit advice based on some pseudoscientific methods that he claimed would increase one's chances to win.

Despite my exhaustion from the long flight, I was rather fascinated by the driver's earnestness. With enthusiasm that borders on devoutness, he talked on even though I did not offer much response. He conveyed the impression that "Where there's Lotto, there's hope"; or even, "Lotto provides eternal life". While his professionalism as a taxi driver left much to be desired, I do admire his piety. It would seem that Lotto was his god, and that winning Lotto was his salvation.

In the Old Testament reading we heard this morning, Joshua gathered the tribes of Israel together. Like the Israelites who assembled before Moses at Mount Sinai, these people who gathered at Shechem were about to make a very important choice. Joshua wanted them to reflect on some very important questions. He wanted them to decide on whether they would serve the gods beyond the Euphrates River, the gods of the Amorites who occupied Canaan, or the God of Abraham who had led them on their journey from the land of slavery through the wilderness into the land they now lived.

For the people, this meeting was a critical turning point. It was a watershed in their life. Not only were their physical lifestyle reshaped from being a nomadic people to making a living from farming, but spiritually they also needed to be reformed. They must decide on which god they would serve. To whom would they belong? For whom would they live? We can gather from the passage that Canaan's polytheistic culture must have somehow infiltrated into Israel, otherwise there would be no need for Joshua to invite the tribes to make a decision.

What kind of god we serve are reflected in the decisions we make. Vice versa, from the kind of decisions we make people can tell what kind of god we believe in. Joshua recounted for the people their history, so as to tell them who the Lord was. He told them the Lord was a God who answered prayers – he answered Abraham's prayers. The Lord was a God who delivered – he led his people out of Egypt. The Lord was a mighty God – he defeated the kings of Canaan and drove out the Amorites. The Lord was no stranger to the Israelites.

And so, when Joshua asked the people to be witnesses against themselves that they had chosen to serve the Lord, the people answered that they were willing. Joshua then told them to put away the foreign gods among them and incline their hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel. The people answered that they would serve and obey the Lord their God. On that day, at Shechem, Joshua made a covenant with the people and made statutes and ordinances for them. God has chosen Abraham and the Israelites to be a channel of blessing for all families of the earth. We become God's people, because we have been chosen by God and also because we choose to serve God. This choice means that we choose to live a life that is closely linked to God, whether it is our lifestyle, our occupations, our morality or how we define our identity.

What then is our foreign gods? What are the things that we need to confront, that we need to do away with? For the Israelites in their agricultural economy a few thousand years ago, it was Astaroth or Baal. Both were foreign gods. Easily spotted. Today, in a modern multicultural world that is much more advanced in the sciences and arts and technology, what are our “foreign gods”? How do we serve and obey the Lord our God in our daily life?

In today’s epistle, some of the faithful at the church of Thessalonica died. In those days, it was common belief among Christians that Christ would come again very soon, probably during their life time. But someone among them died and Christ had yet to return. It was a heavy blow spiritually as well as emotionally. The pain of loss and disappointment can be overwhelming. But the apostle Paul wrote to comfort them by reminding them that Jesus died and rose again. Through Jesus, God would bring with him those who died. Families torn asunder by death would be reunited again to live with God forever.

This passage reminds us of another truth of life: we have no choice over death. Christians who were waiting for the return of Christ still died. If we think that choosing God would mean no more pain and sorrow, then we were only misleading ourselves. Believers in Christ would still die. They would still feel the pains of separation, confusion, anxiety, struggles, and might even experience spiritual depletion and death.

Meanwhile, the parable of the ten bridesmaids tells us that there is more to our faith than waiting passively for Christ’s return. This is the attitude of the five foolish bridesmaids. What they had was a kind of rigid, inflexible form of faith. They had their lamps, but they did not bother to take extra oil. They might appear to have everything, except, perhaps, the faith that the bridegroom would really come.

When they saw that the bridegroom did come, they panicked. They were not ready to go with him into the banquet of the kingdom. After they went and get more oil, they were refused entry. It might sound heartless on the part of the bridegroom, but we must take into consideration Jesus' saying that "not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Therefore, having the oil for the lamp is to do the will of the Father in Heaven, which is living out God's commandment to serve him and to love others.

God has not promised a life free of sorrow and pain. Yet we can look forward to a bright new future, even though it might be born from today's agonies. There are many stories in the Bible that honestly portray uncertainty and sufferings, but such stories often bring us new hopes that help us to accept the reality of life, so that new life can sprout from old pains.

For the people who followed Joshua into the Promised Land, there were harder challenges ahead. They must now work out how to incline their hearts to the Lord their God as they accustom to a new way of living. There was no simple and straight forward answer. Not for the Israelites in those days, nor for us today. Yet there IS a direction: Christ is the way, the truth and the life in whom we can trust and in whom we can have hope. We who gather here are still waiting for the return of the resurrected Christ. We who gather here are renewing our covenant with God, just as the tribes of Israel did at Shechem. Through partaking in the bread and wine, we are not only remembering Jesus, but renewing our lives in him. And through remembering what Jesus had done for us, we are choosing the way that Jesus had chosen. May God guide us and strengthen us in our choice. Amen.