

# **Advent: Be prepared**

Psalm 48; Isaiah 62; Matt 25:1-13

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## **Introduction**

Our expectation of what will happen tomorrow impacts our life today; this is a common rule in life. Those people who do live for today only, without taking into consideration what will happen in the future, are usually seen as foolish.

We study today for the exam of next week; we go to school to prepare for later; we decide now about our holiday next year; we work hard in order to make sure that tomorrow the fridge is filled and that in 25 years time, we will have a reasonable pension to continue filling that fridge.

In spiritual life, we must also prepare. In this season of advent, let us base our actions of today on what

we expect our Lord Jesus Christ to do in the future. He is coming again, to judge the living and the dead. A wise person is prepared.

## **1 Paradise Lost**

In the Gospel Reading, we hear Jesus telling a parable to his disciples. It is important to realize that he spoke to his own followers; they had a small, intimate meeting, Jesus and some of his disciples.

He compares the Kingdom of God with a king who held a wedding feast. Not all guests came well prepared. Mind you, these were people who knew that the wedding would take place, they were interested to come to it – but they had not prepared well.

Jesus warns his disciples to be prepared, immediately after, in the previous chapter, he had told them of the ugly events that would soon take place. His disciples would be persecuted, Jerusalem would be destroyed, and even the holy Temple, the house of God, would be totally razed. And then, in the end, the Bridegroom would come, to save his own. And therefore, the disciples were told to make sure they would be ready for that.

The destruction of the Temple, of the house of God... this concept was horrendous of course in the minds of the disciples of Jesus. They were not expecting the destruction of that great and magnificent building; they were waiting for its salvation by the Messiah! It was going to be the HQ for God's presence in the land.

Throughout their life, the disciples had known the religious songs of their nation. In Psalm 48, they were reminded of the im-

portance of the Temple. That was the place where the fathers of Israel had always worshipped God, where they intimately knew God.

In this Psalm, the sons of Korah sang of the beauty of God in his Holy House. With nostalgia Israel in the time of Jesus repeated those Psalms, reminding themselves of the good old days. Long ago, people really knew the Lord, and He could be found in his House.

The sons of Korah sang about the greatness of God. In the land where I live, in Egypt, Muslims agree – God is great. *Allahu Akbar* is Islam's battle cry, *God is great*. Muslims shout this even during soccer events.

So Muslims agree with the Psalm about the greatness of God, but they have less to say about the other characteristics of God mentioned in Psalm 48. The song speaks of the righteousness of God, and his loving kindness, and that

he is a refuge for people in need.

What a great Lord Israel served! How thankful we must be to that nation that made God known to the world. No wonder the Psalm encouraged Israel *to speak* of this Lord God and the House where he lives to the next generation. The young people in Israel had to know!

And the Psalm also speaks of the worldwide mission of Israel.

According to your name o God, so is your praise to the ends of the earth.

The people of God knew him so well; they were so deeply impressed by his majesty and his love that they wanted to tell their children, yes the whole world... about this God. They existed to praise God – and they did that *everywhere*.

It is impossible to *not* go into the whole world with the praise of our God on our lips, if we have a message so great: God, the

Creator of heaven and earth, is the mighty one where we find refuge; He is in our midst in times of need.

The disciples must, with many in Israel, have deeply desired to experience a similar relationship with God as the sons of Korah did long ago. In those good old days, all things were better. But now, all was not well in Israel....

The Temple was actually much more magnificent than the Temple of Solomon in the time of the sons of Korah. After the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed that Temple, it was rebuilt by Nehemiah – about 500 years before the time of Jesus and his disciples. And in their own times, King Herod the Great had magnified the temple enormously – to be an amazingly beautiful house for God.

But where was God? It seemed as if he had left the land...

Israel was occupied by the armies of Rome. We

know the name of the Roman governor in the time of Jesus, Pontius Pilate. The family of Herod the Great managed the country for the Romans; they were collaborators really. And beside Israel suffering under ungodly rulers, the nation was no longer one under God either. It was deeply divided in all sorts of religious and political sects; many of the religious leaders did not take God and his laws very seriously.

Where was God?

Many in Israel were waiting for the salvation of the land. 'Please Lord our God, we desire to see the hearts of the people of our land to return to you. We desire that you are glorified. Save our land! Save our temple! Be in our midst again.'

## **2 Promise of Isaiah: God will return**

The disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ also knew about the great promises of God – spoken to them by

the prophets. Isaiah was one of the most popular prophets because he used such beautiful words to speak of God's promises. His words were so suitable for Israel in its troubles, so to the point. The passage that we read this morning promises the nation:

Surely your salvation is coming;  
Behold, His reward is with Him,  
And His work before Him.  
And they shall call them  
The Holy People,  
The Redeemed of the LORD;  
And you shall be called  
Sought Out,  
A City Not Forsaken.

That is exactly what God's people needed. This is what the disciples of Jesus desired. That salvation would come to the nation; that God would no longer forsake them, and be in their midst again. And that the nation would be known as a Holy People – people really dedicated to God, a nation under God.

They looked forward with hope to the day that the Holy City and its Temple would no longer be ruled, yes trampled, by Rome and its collaborators. This is what Isaiah promised:

Surely I will no longer give your grain  
As food for your enemies;  
And the sons of the foreigner shall not drink your new wine,  
For which you have labored.  
But those who have gathered it shall eat it,  
And praise the LORD;  
Those who have brought it together shall drink it in My holy courts.

No longer shall the people of God be exploited by Roman taxation, no longer shall the food of Israel be shipped to Rome. What a glorious promise for Israel. In the midst of the darkness of the day, this was a promise that shone like a bright candle.

In the *Psalms* of the sons of Korah, we saw that Israel

once knew God so intimately, that they proclaimed his majesty and his loving care to all nations. In *Isaiah* we also see that the glory of God is to be preached all over the world.

The Gentiles shall see your righteousness,  
And all kings your glory.

Our God must be praised!

*Both* when the sons of Korah celebrated the greatness and loving-kindness of God, and *also* when Isaiah spoke of God's fantastic restoration of the nation, we see that mission to the world was part and parcel of the renewal.

The Spiritual health of the people of God can be measured, I believe, by its interest in spreading the knowledge of God – both to their own children and in their own land, and also in the whole wide world.

Renewal was what Israel craved for. But: A real interest in reaching the nations was not part of their

view. They hated the Romans, and they only desired the independence of Israel. Strongly they believed that if only their land would not be abused by these foreign... terrorists, all would be well.

Most people loved Isaiah's promises of blessings, of health, and wealth... Salvation and reward, and being a land that is not forsaken by God! 'If God would only solve all of our problems, then all would be well here.'

### **3 Being Prepared**

But Israel was not ready. Many believed, but most shut themselves out from God's blessings.

Israel had forgotten that the prophets did not just promise salvation, they also preached God's preconditions. The nation, and each individual, was called to prepare their hearts and their lives for the coming of salvation, for the coming of the Lord.

Prepare the way for the people;  
Build up,  
Build up the highway!  
Take out the stones,  
Lift up a banner for the peoples!

There was preparation work to be done. Our Lord God asks faith, and commitment, and obedience to his Word. John the Baptist came, calling people to faith and to obedience to the Hebrew Scriptures, the Word of God as they had it in those days. 'Prepare, for salvation is near.' The Lord Jesus Christ was coming.

This is our great Advent story. God promises salvation to us, as a Church, and to our nations, and the people of God are promised amazing blessings. But for all this, we must turn our hearts to God. Our hearts. That is, the center of our life. This means more than reverently singing songs once a week, or dutifully going to the house of God.

God wants to be known by his people – if his people listen and obey.

As Jesus Christ our Lord worked in the carpentry workshop and on the land of his father Joseph, and as he grew up and went to the synagogue, and as he began to proclaim the Good News in all the land, he found that many people were religious, and interested in what he had to say, but most of them would not listen. Salvation had come... but the people were not ready.

Israel wanted to be saved from the foreigners, it wanted the beauty of religion, the glorious Temple, and God in it – but when God came to offer that salvation, they wanted it on their own terms.

Jesus told his disciples – the House of God that you and all Israelites so admire, will be destroyed. Razed. Nothing will be left of it. And the disciples were told that Israel would persecute them, just as Israel would persecute and kill the Salvation that God had sent to Israel.

God himself came down to his people, but they were too busy, too full of themselves, to recognize that in Jesus Christ, God was fulfilling all his promises.

What an aberration. The mighty and loving God comes down to be with his people, and they are not interested. They like the beautiful services in the house of God, the candles, solemn services, sermons... but no room in the inn of their heart and life.

Jesus then tells his disciples a parable. The kingdom of God is like a wedding feast. A wedding... this is language we also heard in Isai ah 62:

You shall no longer be termed Forsaken,  
Nor shall your land any more be termed Desolate;  
For the LORD delights in you,  
And your land shall be married.  
For as a young man marries a virgin,  
So shall your sons marry you;

And as the bridegroom  
rejoices over the bride,  
So shall your God rejoice  
over you.

The disciples understood the language of marriage. Jesus uses words, the imagery, that they all knew from their Hebrew Scriptures. The kingdom of God is like a wedding feast.

The invitation to come to the feast is an invitation of grace, completely undeserved. The invitation, in the words of the Scottish Reformed theologian William Barclay, comes 'from nothing other than the wide-armed, open-hearted, generous hospitality of the king'. [William Barclay, *Gospel of Matthew*, Vol II, NDSB (Westminster, 1975, 2001), p. 313].

With arms wide open, he'll pardon you. God has arms wide open, and those arms are, effectively, the arms of the Church of God, inviting more people to join into the Kingdom of God. Wherever you read your Bible, you will see the plan

of God of mission for the Church....

St Peter wrote in his first letter to the churches, so to us as well:

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and His own special people.

This is covenant-language; believers in Jesus Christ are, together with the remnant from Israel, the renewed people of God, a holy nation. We are called the House of God, and the Temple of God, in the New Testament.

It is utterly amazing what God has given to us, we who as non-Jews once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy. And St Peter tells us why God has privileged and called us:

...that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

## **Conclusion**

What is God's reason for calling us? I believe it is his praise. To the glory of his name. How do we glorify his name? By loving him, and living for him, and... by proclaiming him. In the Church, to your children, to people worldwide.

That was what God wanted Israel to do: to praise Him, and to proclaim his glory in the Temple, to their children, in their land, and everywhere. And this

is what we, the people of God through Jesus Christ, also do! For a heart that is truly touched by God Almighty, will always desire to do his will. To proclaim Him, one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and to live for him.

May Christ Jesus, when he comes back for the great wedding, find our hearts and lives prepared. And may we use the weeks of Advent, to ensure that our lamps are burning indeed.

**+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit  
Amen**