

OPENING COLLECT

Heavenly Father, whose blessed Son was revealed to destroy the works of the devil and to make us the children of God and heirs of eternal life: grant that we, having this hope, may purify ourselves even as he is pure; that when he shall appear in power and great glory we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom; where he is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

FIRST READING: Zephaniah 1.7, 12-18

⁷ Be silent before the Lord GOD! For the day of the LORD is at hand; the LORD has prepared a sacrifice, he has consecrated his guests. ¹² At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, 'The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm.' ¹³ Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them.

¹⁴ The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. ¹⁵ That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, ¹⁶ a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. ¹⁷ I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind;

because they have sinned against the LORD, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung.

¹⁸ Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath; in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

As we move closer to Advent, another 'Day of the LORD' passage, this time from the less well-known prophet Zephaniah. The reference to the Lord's sacrifice, and the consecrated guests, may remind us of Samuel preparing the sacrifice, before he anoints Saul as King (1 Sam. 9). It may also be seen to point to the coming feast of the Kingdom (Isaiah 25.6), and to the coming judgement, which precedes it. The prophet forthtells the destruction of Israel, or at least of the complacent and sinful, which is uneasy reading! Zephaniah is thought to have written during the C.7th. and speaks about the judgement of God on his people, but also about the destruction of other people. He ends here speaking of "a terrible end ... for ..all the inhabitants of the earth" (v.18). For this reason, his writings are seen as moving away from the prophesy of doom, found in many, like Amos, and on to the later 'judgement and punishment' spoken of in apocalyptic writing. Readers of the book will find that there is some hope, however, for later (3.9) he speaks of God 'changing the speech of the peoples that they may call on the name of the Lord', and he promises to 'save the lame and the outcast' and 'bring them home'. Judgement and mercy!! God always hopes that people will turn and live the life of love.

SECOND READING: 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

¹ Concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!

This passage, from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, echoes some of last week's Gospel passage. The moment of judgement and the new age is not predictable, so Christians need to be ready for it at any time: it will come like a thief in the night (v.2). But, says Paul, you are 'children of light', so you will not be caught out. Keep awake and ready.

Epistle continued: 4 But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; 5 for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. 6 So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; 7 for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. 9 For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10 who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. 11 Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Put on your Christian armour (cp. Ephesians 6.10ff.) and look after one another, working together against the 'Day of the LORD'.

Gospel: Matthew 25.14-30

Jesus said to his disciples, 14 "The kingdom of heaven is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." 21 His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." 22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." 23 His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." 24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." 26 But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?"

That same 'caring for one another and working together' can be seen in the Gospel for today. The parable of the talents looks very individual, and at one level it is. However, it may be good for us to think about the slaves, in the story, as being different communities of Christians as well. It is easy to establish a way of life, and a way of worship, which slips into formalism and becomes an end in itself. The success of a serving community depends on each of us realising our gifts and the gifts of others, and harnessing the wealth of the community in pursuit of its task. Matthew's placing of the parable is, of course, still in the context of the approaching judgement and the dawning of the new age, but being watchful and alert, which we were considering last week, is not just about being ready for 'the end' but about being engaged in the work of the Kingdom at all times. It was oil for their lamps that the foolish virgins lacked and latent, hidden and unused talents are about as much use as lamps without oil!

Gospel continued:

27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29 For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Post-Communion Collect:

Gracious Lord, in this holy sacrament you give substance to our hope: bring us at the last to that fullness of life for which we long; through Jesus Christ our Saviour. **Amen.**