Liturgical Parables in November 2017 – Cycle A

I want to focus today on the three parables of Jesus presented in the November Gospel readings of Matthew 25:1-13; Matthew 25:14-30; and Matthew 25:31-46.

The parables are about the ten virgins awaiting the bridegroom well into the night; the servants to whom funds were allocated to be invested while their master was off on a trip; and finally Matthew's Last Judgment scene depicting the positive and negative consequences of human behavior.

The virtuous in these settings are well affirmed as model performers of Christ's standard of behavior. The ten virgins carried enough oil for their lamps; two servants amplified the talents they received; the righteous saw to it that the have-nots were taken care of.

The others fell short of that standard and suffered severe consequences, *if we read the accounts literally*. The lax virgins are locked out of the wedding celebration, told that the groom does not know them any more. The one servant who failed to invest his talent loses what he has and is thrown into the darkness outside, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth. And the goats in the Judgment episode who failed to live up to the standard set by the good sheep are told to depart from the Son of Man into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Salvation is for the virtuous, the generous, the caring, the alert, the risk-takers, the obedient, the Christ-like – not for the slack, the timid, the people preoccupied with themselves, unable to see the needs of others among them.

This seems to be true of other parables found within the Gospels of not only Matthew but its synoptic counterparts of Mark and Luke – a kind of vindictive finale like the man who shows up at the king's wedding feast (Matt. 22) whose attire is inappropriate and of whom the king says: "Bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. For many are invited but few are chosen."

Such parables are not as wide open as -say- the ones about the Good Samaritan and the Father of the Prodigal Son.

Matthew and Paul

Have you ever taken real notice of how the New Testament is organized – how it was organized way back by the second century AD? First we have the three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with John as a unique fourth – the narratives introducing us to the sayings and events of Jesus' public career. But then we switch to the Letters of St. Paul, the big ones: Romans, the two Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, First Thessalonians, Philemon, *which seem to be hardly aware of the four Gospels!* Indeed Paul's letters antedate the composition of the Gospels which Gospels (with maybe the exception of Mark) came to publication *after* the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD – a critical and highly influential moment for both Jews and Christians. Matthew tends to be dated from the early 80's AD.

And may I not suggest that if Paul had been living so late as to review Matthew's finished Gospel there is a good chance that he might have lost his temper over the three parables noted this month; that he would have had much to say critically of some of Matthew's content and even orthodoxy?

And could that be because Matthew's Gospel tends to lean sympathetically toward the traditional emphasis of then current Pharisaical Judaism, with its apotheosis of the Law of Moses, its minute regulation of Jewish life, its isolation of Jewish tradition by so many restrictions, e.g. dietary rules, from alien, Gentile contagion, separation from the universal babel characteristic of non-Jewish culture? (Particularly after 70 AD.)

It's not that Matthew's Gospel is in any way kind to Pharisees itself. Paul would have had much to support in Matthew's quote of Jesus in Chapter 23:14 ff.:
Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You lock the kingdom of heaven before human beings. You do not enter yourselves, nor do you allow entrance to those trying to enter. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You traverse sea and land to make one convert, and when that happens you make him a child of Gehenna twice as much as yourselves . . . Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees . . . You pay tithes of mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier things of the law: judgment and mercy and fidelity. [But] these you should have done, without neglecting the others. Blind guides, who strain out the gnat and swallow the camel . . . Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees . . . You cleanse the outside of cup and dish, but inside they are full of plunder and self-indulgence . . . Blind Pharisee, cleanse first the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may be clean . . . You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men's bones and every kind of filth.

Nevertheless, scholars see Matthew's Gospel as addressed to a primarily Jewish audience in the region of Syria – even the city of Antioch – a metropolis where many synagogues operated for many years and no doubt was the destination of many Jewish refugees from the siege and destruction of Jerusalem.

By the post-70's a fair number of Jews had also embraced the Christian Gospel. Being Jewish, many remained attached to their ancient heritage, still vacillated between the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Grace, felt uncomfortable with their new associates, the Gentile Christians. There is the famous episode in Antioch while Paul and Peter were still alive. Paul writes of it in Galatians 2:11:

And when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he clearly was wrong. For, until some people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to draw back and separated himself, because he was afraid of the circumcised. And the rest of the Jews [also] acted hypocritically along with him, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not on the right road in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of all, "If you, though a Jew, are living like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

The Gospel of Matthew, again according to scholars, was influenced by this tension. As I have said, they locate the Gospel's origin in the region of Antioch with its centuries old Jewish population, synagogues and now Jewish converts to the Gospel mixed with Gentiles. And one can understand his composing his Gospel in harmony with the same traditions of Jesus that Paul proclaims – transcending a legal approach to God by adopting the gracious one of Christ – as in Matthew 5:

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for one mile, [exceed that] go with him for two miles. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow . . . You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.

Far from struggling to keep the minutiae of the Law of Moses, the Jesus of Matthew encourages his followers to go to an excess, to be hyperbolically gracious – even as is the God of Jesus. Paul would applaud such a human maturity.

But still Matthew is reluctant to detach entirely from the legal mentality of his old tradition. Otherwise why does Matthew's Sermon on the Mount begin with Jesus saying: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven.* He seems to be reassuring people that the Old Law abides – so don't be nervous. The tie has not been severed. And yet he also quotes Jesus as saying, *I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.*

In a way it sounds like Matthew is straddling a bit – toehold in the Old Law assuring continuity but foothold in the New as the ultimate place to be. (Has not the Church in subsequent centuries done the same? Matthew became the prime Gospel of later Christianity – indeed it was believed until the 20th century among Catholics to have been written prior to Mark. Why? Because it comes before Mark in the New Testament.

Paul's position

Paul resists such attachment to the Law as a kind of resistance to the full impact of his Gospel of a gracious, not vindictive, God – as manifest in Christ. In Romans he insists: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation <u>of everyone who believes [dares to trust]</u>: for Jew first, and then Greek. For in it is revealed the righteousness [fidelity] of God.* God is not two faced! He then launches into a description of the corruption of the Gentile world around him in no uncertain terms – and then, so as to leave no one out – he turns on his Jewish auditor who applauds his appraisal of Gentiles and he says in effect, who are you to boast: *you are without excuse, every one of you who passes judgment. For by the standard by which you judge another you condemn yourself, since you, the judge, do the very same things.*

And so despite its laws *the whole human race* experiences an undertow of selfishness from which no amount of laws will spring us loose. As I have often

said, the Law is like a greased ladder; slippage is of its very nature. And so he concludes: *For we have already brought the charge against Jews and Greeks alike that they are all under the domination of sin . . . since no human being will be justified in his sight by observing the law; for through the law comes [only] consciousness of sin.* If the Law tells us anything, it tells us we are lost. Distinctions fade.

Paul refuses to build up again the things he tore down as he goes on to say: *Through the law I died to the law, that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.*

And we are right back where we started from, heaven for some, hell for others. Five virgins enter the party, five are turned away. Is that the picture Christ came and died to reveal? So what else is new??

The New Pentateuch

Modern scholars in analyzing Matthew find an interesting pattern throughout. Look at the handout. There seem to be five sections to his Gospel, each composed of an action sequence followed by words of Jesus, each section then concluding with the words "when Jesus finished these words" or something to that effect. The Gospel is thus turned into a fivefold book – probably in the manner of the Old Law, the Torah or Pentateuch (fivefold scroll case).

This may be one way Matthew links the New to the Old; his Gospel is a new Pentateuch, made up of the new Law of Jesus in a fivefold pattern. Jesus is our new Moses. The infancy narrative about Jesus echoes in ways the infancy narrative of Moses in the Exodus – where Pharaoh orders the immediate suffocation of every male Hebrew child, with Moses being rescued as Jesus was. And as the Book of Deuteronomy, the final Book of the Torah ends with Moses on Mount Pisgah surveying the realm of Israel's future, so Matthew ends with Jesus on a mountain in Galilee saying (as a New Moses?) *All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*

And so, while Matthew echoes the spirituality of St. Paul – he seems to hedge a bit in terms of the absolute nature of grace – slips into the tones of a church becoming institutional, tones of reward and punishment, enforcement – again if the three parables are read literally.

The parable of the ten virgins

To me the only way to experience this parable as a gateway into the world as Christ displays it is to experience it in, let's say, a Gestalt manner; to enter into it and *become* the parable. We are invited to experience the kingdom of heaven, the realm of true God – as if it were a wedding celebration. We come equipped with lamps supported by adequate oil – fuel – enthusiasm, anticipation, a readiness to see better, take it all in. Or we come as if still drowsy from the fogginess of the everyday world we live in – the news of the day, the petty things that demand all our attention, the things that annoy us. Too many things on our minds.

And sure enough the bridegroom arrives, things are to be revealed, unveiled, the joy of the discovery of meaning, of what it means to be! Eager for the moment, more than awakened by the cry, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!" we reignite our enthusiasm and join in the procession.

Or that part of me that is tired, preoccupied with things less worthy of our attention, who has cooled off over time . . . I try but can't quite get a free ride on the energy of those for whom this has been the moment they have been waiting for. I can't get into that realm of solidarity with God and people and creation. I'm left lonely, feeling like I'm always on the outside looking in.

(I used to actually feel that way as a boy in a new suburb, no longer confined to row houses and narrow streets but on sidewalks overlooking lawns and flower beds and homes with the evening glow of lights from living rooms so comfortably furnished and sheltering people of quality . . . and I? On the outside, unobserved, looking into a world seemingly better than the one I knew.)

Too often this parable tells the fate of the wise versus the foolish as if it arrives at the *final coming* of Christ. It divides humanity into the good and the not so good – with the good going to heaven and the bad being told by Christ, by God – "I do not know you." This I think is what would arouse the ire of St. Paul. The grace of God is not selective, it extends to all of us because all of us are in need of it – and it's the grace of God that can supply oil, lubrication, fuel to all our thinking and doing, making us – all *ten* of us – godlike, gracious, too. The door is never shut. The wedding feast is open for partying every day, every moment of our lives – to all of us – giving us plenty of time to wake up. The parable is not about the end of time – but about yesterday, today and tomorrow. So go, replenish your lamps, shine in the darkness, never let yourself cease to be excited.

The parable of the talents

This again has to do with an accounting upon the return of a master from a long journey. He leaves five talents with one servant and two with another and one with the third – probably according to their rank within his estate. A talent is a weighty bit of change depending on its gold or silver makeup. You know the story.

Or rather, *be* the story. You with your five talents invest them in one venture or another and double their worth or with your two again you double their worth. You don't just pocket the money, keep it safe, intact but go the extra mile with it and it pays off.

But then there is the you who would wrap his one talent, his challenge from his master, in a handkerchief and bury it in the ground. Why? Fear for one thing. The master is the boss, I'm only a servant – if I take a chance and invest that talent and lose it I'm in for a lecture if not physical punishment. I know, because like all bosses, I know he's no easy boss. Also the others may lose their talents by investment while I will have at least held the line.

No hyperbole for me, no excess, straight and narrow, wary, eyes in the back of my head – security, a narrow path, comfort. So when the day of reckoning comes, the others are promoted, those who dared to live the Sermon on the Mount – but me? Even fear should have driven me to take risks. But no, I clutched the talent, hugged it close, hugged myself close so as not to be exposed to the discomfort of loss, to be viewed as a loser. Well I AM a loser! I wish to live without risk, to hold back, to avoid mistakes, be live intact – calcified, irresponsible, faint-hearted. And my fate and that of the shy servant? *Throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.*

But if we read this in the literal sense, let's say the Pharisaical way, Paul returns to haunt us. Because as far as weakness, need, fear, short cuts are concerned, everyone is so impaired, the good guys as well as the bad. Nor do we have to wait for a last judgment to sort things out – nor to experience the consequences of such cowardice, such moral paralysis. That Last Judgment comes everyday of our lives when we hold back the treasure God has invested in each of us, when we doubt it, lock it up – and experience the darkness of everyday life, the wailing, the grinding of teeth that results from not living hyperbolically, courageously, optimally. Read the papers, watch TV, the news and the fiction –

we are already living in hell because of the stinginess of our thoughts and behavior.

The Judgment of the Nations

This is not really a parable except in so far as the righteous are called sheep and the condemned are called goats. And here is where Matthew leans more heavily into the old traditions of Judaism rather than the thinking of St. Paul – for he adopts the current Jewish apocalyptic and therefore juridical or vindictive type of closure to human history – borrowing from the non-canonical Book of Henoch (which originated somewhere around the 160's BC) and wherein, I think, we have for the first time a description of wicked people descending into a hell of darkness and fire.

Indeed scholars in reviewing this portion of Matthew reiterate what I said earlier – namely that Matthew seems to compromise the earlier theology of grace promoted by St. Paul – by making works, performance the measure of salvation – forgetting that we are all sinners and that God's nature of absolute mercy is the source of our redemption. And so the parables I've been talking about plus this Last Judgment scene have in a way made God and Christ somewhat scary figures – no quarter given if we have not a good report card on our final day of time.

Nevertheless, Matthew does describe the key to our becoming holy in terms of sensitivity to the needs of others – the hungry, thirsty, naked, ill, alien, imprisoned (in more ways than one). In other words, our spiritual health is best evident in our caring about others – beyond our usual comfort range and also in regard to ourselves insofar as we are hungry in so many ways, thirsty for something, vulnerable, sick of mind, sick of life, lonely, all locked up inside. And open to the gracious power of God – and nothing less – to render us truly human.

But once again, this is not an apocalyptic, vindictive, juridical type of drama – awaiting us, terrifying us at the terminus of our lives or of history. It is meant to be read as an event that happens *everyday*. The challenge to see more than we want to see, to awaken to the plight of our world, human and otherwise and to go even to an extreme (like the firefighters recently) to revive it. Every moment is a moment not so much of juridical judgment, reward or punishment but of a divine invitation to responsibility which we inhale whenever we think of God as

so gracious as to die for us – so maybe we should in ways die for others – and become a human being.

How often does Jesus say – regarding his interventions in history – *you know not the day nor the hour*. Which means you can't schedule it in any final way – because he arrives in your life every minute of it – if you allow grace to cultivate such readiness within you.

Still as the drama of Matthew says, to remain closed up, minus the oil needed to illuminate your way, bury your talent, your attention to anything but yourself – here and now in this life you will experience a shortness of breath, aggravations never ending, frustrations – because you have lost touch with the nature of humanity that Christ embodies and would share with you.

And so I depart from this place to participate in the Eucharist, the ultimate parable. Will I attend with enthusiasm, a readiness for joy or will I attend half awake, no cultivation of my readiness – just another Mass? Will I find in this Eucharist a chance to invest what God has given me, turn a profit, generate a newer, fresher vision of what life is all about? Or will I attend preoccupied with myself or with the posture of some other parishioner and not with a readiness to be awakened to the suffering Christ shares with every human being? Will I attend or won't I?

OVERTURE Infancy narrative	ACTION Commences Adult min.	WORD Sermon on Mount "when he ha finished. . . when Jesus finished these words.	ACTION Healings & growth of following	WORD Instruction on how to conduct mission when Jesus finished giving these instructions	ACTION Teaching & Events in Galilee	WORD Parables of Kingdom when Jesus finished these parables.	ACTION More action & conflict in Galilee & surround.	WORD Instruction on Christian community behavior when Jesus finished these words.	ACTION Ascent & Entry into Jerusalem	WORD Apocalyptic discourse; Parables of Judgment when Jesus had finished this discourse	P A S S I O N	Resurrection Go preach to all nations . .
c.1-2	3:1-4:25	5:1-7:29	8:1-9:34	9:35-11:1	11:1-12:50	13:1-52	13:53-17:23	17:24-19:1	19:2-23:39	24:1-25:46		