

Sermon for Third to Last Sunday of the Church Year (Trinity 25) – Matthew 24:15-28

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

What do the Scriptures teach us about the end of the world, the final judgment, and Christ's second coming? We know from today's gospel that Christ will return visibly and with great glory on the Last Day: "For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." God's light of eternity will finally and fully burst forth into our time.

On that day, Christ will return to judge the world, but not to set up an earthly government. There will be no need for an earthly government. God will no longer work mediately through faulty, failing, and sinful men. He will do it Himself. He is the Judge.

On the Day of Christ's return, the world will be silent. Every eye will see the One whose concealed life is now revealed. Those who have never bent the knee to Him will kneel. The time is up.

And the time of Christ's second coming is known only the God alone. Only the Father knows the specific day of His Son's return. He will come when we least expect it. I would imagine on that day everything will go on as usual ... the sun will rise, the earth will do what it does based on the season, the rivers will flow into the oceans, people will go about their daily work, and the children will be instructed in their schooling. In short, as it is today, so will it be on the last day. Had the five foolish virgins known the day, they would not be foolish. So we too must be ready at all times.

Ready for what? Before Christ returns, there will be increasing turmoil and distress for the church and for the world: "And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short." Wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, the increase of lawlessness, and love grown cold are the buds of the leaves of the fig tree. These are the signs that call for our repentance as Christ's return draws near.

But the second coming of Christ is also the source of hope and joy for us. Our redemption is drawing near. For in that day, we are redeemed – bought back from the devil, the world, and our sinful nature that have their grasp on us right now and will continue to in this life. We are redeemed from all evil and brought into His kingdom only through His Blood. All cares, signing, crying, and drudgery will come to an end, for every tear will be wiped from our eyes. Those who have died in Christ Jesus will arise as the earth gives them up. The living are transformed. The perishable put on imperishable. All who died in the Lord, and we who live in Him will experience the wondrous rebirth of our bodies.

And all this glorious news our Lord sums up in one verse spoken at the end of today's Gospel reading: "Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather." Perhaps not the most pleasant image, but it's true. "Ay-a-tos" is the Greek word that is translated broadly as "a bird of prey." Some English translations say 'vulture.' And this fits. Vultures gather around corpses. Imagine the vulture: black feathers cover the wings and body. The neck is slumped and hunched. No feathers cover the neck or head. Beady dark eyes. They're a gruesome sight to look at. They're scavenger birds that pick at the leftover carcasses from kills, adding to their disrepute. The vulture never really goes in for the kill. They're scavengers. They leave the chasing, the fighting, and the killing to the other animals: tigers, cheetahs, lions. Vultures come in at the end after all the hard work is done.

What's more, the term and description of a vulture has made it into modern English slang. For example, if you call someone a vulture, what does that mean? It describes a person who greedily preys on others, who uses them to their own advantage with no thought given to the person they use: "That vulture would sell out his best friend." Have we not also lived selfish and self-centered lives? Have we not used others only to our advantage? Even when serving others, have we not also looked first for how our service might benefit ourselves? The words of Daniel about the abomination also apply to us. Let the reader understand. We have a truly desolate abomination sitting in our most holy place, namely our conscience, where God alone was supposed to sit and rule. But we put ourselves there. No golden calf compares to the precious and immense idol we have fashioned of our self. If we remain the center of our universe, Christ is not there. If this is so, His suffering, His death, His blood is all in vain.

But Christ's death is not in vain. He dies for vultures. Like us. The Lion of the tribe of Judah has slayed death and the devil. We vultures just come in on the coattails of Christ's victory for us. He fought. He conquered, so that we are the victors with Him.

Christ fights and wins, not by the sword and military might, but by dying. He defeats sin, death, and the devil by becoming a corpse. He gave Himself up selflessly with only us in mind. And to the corpse we gather, as vultures we know what to do. We come as vultures, but we leave as eagles. For that Greek word Ay-a-tos can also be translated as such. We rise as eagles—why? Because the corpse to whom we gather is not dead, but alive. He rose from the dead. Jesus lives and feeds us with His Body and Blood, putting new life in us. Christ forgives us, and so to Him, we the elect, gather. Whether the last day comes today, tomorrow, or a hundred years from now Jesus died and rose again for you—therefore encourage one another with these words. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠