

The Challenge of the Return of Christ
Luke 12:35-48

Christians are divided about the details about the manner and time of the second coming of Christ. Among evangelical Christians the most popular interpretation of the return of Christ at the present time is set forth in the film "Thief in the Night" which we saw last week. But, although all evangelical Christians believe in the return of Christ, many are quite critical of the theology and atmosphere of that film which is representative of fundamentalist dispensational theology. In most Presbyterian and Reformed churches, for example, ministers and elders are free to hold a variety of beliefs concerning the return of Christ. Our creeds and confessions require only that we believe that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. Although we are free to hold diverse opinions most ministers I know within Presbyterian and Reformed circles believe that in the death of Christ Satan ^{already} has been crushed, defeated, and chained. "I saw Satan fall from heaven" Jesus said.

The death of Christ was like D-Day in Europe. Normandy was the deciding battle in the war. The war was won on the beaches of Normandy. Days and months of fighting remained. Many were killed. But the decisive battle had been won. ^{No crucifixion is the true D-Day.} On the cross, Satan's head was crushed. The decisive battle was won. We no longer need fear Satan. We can laugh at him. He no longer blinds the nations. Since the death of Christ the light of the gospel has shown around the world. That's not to say that Satan is powerless. Just as a snake writhes in its death pangs so also Satan writhes as a dieing snake causing division and turmoil within the world and the church. Our D-Day was the death of Christ. Our Victory Europe day will be the return of Christ.

Our belief in the return of Christ presents all of us with a challenge

whether you are a dispensationalist who believes in the secret rapture of the church or an amillennialist like myself. In thinking about the challenge of the return of Christ remember the words of our Lord in our Scripture lesson.

From this we can learn that the expectation of *the return of Christ challenges us to faithful service in the work of Christ's kingdom.* "Be dressed ready for service" One of the disturbing things about the film last week is that I got the impression that if a person strives to work for world peace he is a tool of the antichrist. That is a terrible distortion of the gospel. Of course, Jesus said that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword. When the Gospel is faithfully preached and lived it will offend the proud and powerful and rich. But if we really believe that Christ will return we will be faithful servants, working for peace in the world between men and nations, and between God and humankind. During his absence Christ expects his servants to be busy in his service, doing the things that he did when he was on earth; teaching, healing, preaching, feeding the hungry, and celebrating the sacraments.

Dispensational theology disobediently gives up on the world that Christ came to save. It is obedient to only one half of the mission Christ has given the church. It is faithful in evangelism but it ignores, for the most part, the duty to work for justice, peace, and to end the night of wrong that still exist. But I must honestly admit that reformed theology has been obedient to only one half of the mission Christ has given us. We have correctly seen that Christ is Lord of every area of life. Reformed Christians therefore have been in the forefront in politics, social issues, economic issues, intellectual and artistic endeavors in obedience to the cultural mandate that God has given us. But we have not been as obedient

in the area of evangelism as we should have been. We have been rightly critical of manipulative methods of evangelism and altar calls and decisionism, but we have not been faithful as we should in biblical forms of evangelism. The great question is will he find us busy when he comes; active in all the work he has given us to do.

Secondly, *the return of Christ is a challenge to justice in our relationships with others.* The manager in the parable took advantage of his master's absence not only to be lazy but to act unjustly with those in his house-hold. "He then begins to beat the menservants and womenservants and to eat and drink and get drunk." "My master is taking a long time in coming" he says. He thinks he will never be called to account for the injustice he has perpetrated. But Jesus warns that the master "will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers."

We are going to be held accountable for the injustice we perpetrate and allow to take place in the world. We are responsible for the revolutionary forces at work in Central America far more than the communists. We are responsible for the communist take over of Ethiopia. We are responsible for the blood-letting in Palestine, Northern Ireland and South Africa. Every time we buy cheap bananas in the grocery store we are supporting unjust working conditions on the Central American banana plantations. Lord Shaftesbury was well aware of the challenge of the return of Christ in this respect. "We are responsible", he would say of the exploiters. "Their guilt is our guilt; we incur it by conniving at it. Do not blame them, blame yourselves..." He devoted his life to fighting the cruelty that existed in nineteenth-century England. He led the movements

to help the weak and ill-treated-- the women and children who worked in factories and mines, the climbing chimney soot, the insane, the paupers, and the animals who were tortured for sport.

This is a missing note in evangelical Christianity today for which we will be held accountable when Christ returns. Too often evangelical Christians are supporting the oppressors and those who are the perpetrators of injustice around the world. Many of us have adopted a bomb-shelter mentality which withdraws from social and cultural engagement and simply waits for the end to come, passively tolerating or even welcoming the spread of evil because it hastens the return of Christ.

Thirdly, *the expectation of the Lord's return is a challenge to endurance.* There are those within the evangelical church who say that Christians will be spared great tribulation; that we will be whisked secretly out of a world bereft of the leavening influence of the church and the Holy Spirit. But Jesus issued numerous warnings that his followers were to expect opposition and even persecution. When we obey Christ and follow him we will incur the displeasure and wrath of the rich, the powerful, and the oppressor. When we faithfully proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord and our allegiance to him transcends our lesser allegiance to our nation we will be slandered and hated. Today people are jailed in communist Russia for preaching Christ openly; and in capitalistic Guatemala men and women may be tortured for publicly reading certain passages from the Epistle of James which speak of God's judgment on the rich and the oppressor. We should not be surprised if we suffer. Only let us not suffer as wrongdoers. Let us not think that Christians who have supported oppressive regimes suffer for Christ when the communist take over. Their suffering is an expression of God's wrath and judgment

against injustice.

But no matter how much Christians are persecuted or oppressed we must not resort to violence or revolution or vengeance. "Vengeance is mine" says the Lord. Do we really trust God enough to allow him to take vengeance on the wicked oppressor? When evil is in the ascendancy and when there is nothing active that we can do except to pray; to wait; and to suffer; then Jesus said, "hold fast until I come." This phrase comes to us from the book of Revelation. The whole book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse, has sometimes been called a Sursum Corda, the Latin phrase which means "lift up your hearts". The book of Revelation is not some kind of horoscope to which we go to look for details of the return of Christ the way that pagans exam the entrails of birds for future omens. Rather, it is a stirring appeal to persecuted Christians to lift up their hearts because however much they are called to suffer, God is on the throne and Jesus Christ is coming soon to vindicate his elect.

This then is the challenge of the second coming of Jesus Christ. It is a challenge to faithful service; it is a challenge to work for justice; it is a challenge to patient endurance.

But this challenge is effective only on one condition and that is that we watch. This was the repeated staccato command of Jesus; "Watch"! And again in our scripture lesson, "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning... you must be ready." This watchfulness and readiness is to be a characteristic of the Christian life. This is what led Lord Shaftesbury to say, "I do not think that in the last forty years I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return." If we live in the constant expectation of his return the challenge will be great. We will do our part in the way of Christian service

supporting with prayer and our giving and in our actions the work of Christ in evangelism and society. We will faithfully work for peace in the world and proclaim the Gospel of peace; that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. We will refuse to give our passive or active support of oppression in Central America or South Africa, or right here in Buffalo and we will actively support the cause of justice. We will faithfully proclaim the Lordship of Christ in every area of life and refuse to give to the state any autonomy as though there were some areas of life in which the government was sovereign (for example, the political, economical, and social spheres) and other areas of life in which Christ is sovereign such as the religious sphere.

Finally, I know that the film last week upset and frightened some people whose faith in Christ I have no doubts about. That is unfortunate. Because the same Christ who died on the cross for our sins is the one to whom God has entrusted our final judgment. He has entrusted final judgment to the one who ate and drank with sinners and was called the friend of sinners. We can trust him with our final judgment. I am not at all certain about what the future holds... whether its a literally thousand year reign of Christ, or the so-called secret rapture of the church as dispensational theology teaches; or whether I or you will have to go through great tribulation. I don't know who or what is the anti-christ nor do I fully understand the mysterious visions in the book of Revelation or the prophecies of Daniel. And apparently not many do because there are so many divergent interpretations of those chapters even by fundamentalist Bible teachers. But this one thing I am certain of "that in all affliction and persecution (that I may have to face) I may await with head held high the very Judge from heaven who has already submitted himself to the

judgment of God for me and has removed all the curse from me; that he will cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation, but he shall take me, together with all his elect, to himself into heavenly joy and glory." When we trust and obey Christ as Lord and Savior we also can have that certainty. Amen.

(Preached May 12, 1985 at the evening service of Knox Presbyterian Church, Kenmore, NY by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor)