

Who's That Knocking?

This week's Gospel reading is one of several similar stories told by Jesus to his disciples, on the theme of servants being found ready when the "master" comes back, no matter how long the master delays. These are familiar stories – the story of the talents in Luke 19 and also in Matthew 25, where the servants have to give an accounting of how they have invested the master's wealth, the story about the vineyard where the bad servants take over and run it for themselves which appears in all three Gospels, stories like this one about servants waiting up like the story of the ten maidens in Matthew 25.

Our story today has an interesting juxtaposition of examples on why it's important to be alert. Not only do we hear about the servants being praised and rewarded by their master for their readiness, we also hear about the householder being alert against thieves, which also occurs essentially in the same words in Matthew 24:42, again in the context of Jesus' return and God's final judgment. In both examples, the key factor is unexpectedness. The servants don't know when the master will return, the house owner doesn't know when a thief might come.

Traditionally these stories have been interpreted on a common theme – Jesus' second coming, the coming of the Kingdom. It's clear from the New Testament that early Christians expected that return to be imminent, and also concrete. Jesus would come back at the head of a heavenly army to free Judea from the Romans and set up an earthly kingdom. The disciples argued amongst themselves about which of them would be more powerful in that earthly kingdom. Early Christians pooled their wealth and sold their property, many including Paul argued against getting married because there was no point, no need, see I Corinthians 7.

Jesus would be back any day now, and so they needed to live in hourly expectation of that new world. They took the promise of Matthew 16:28 literally: I assure that there are some here who will not die until they see the Son of Man come as king, a promise reiterated in Luke as well. In particular it was believed that the Beloved Disciple, John, would live to see Jesus' return John 21:22-23, which is still held as true by some splinter groups of Christians.

But it soon became clear that Jesus' literal return was not coming as quickly as people had hoped – When Paul is writing to the Thessalonians, he's writing to people who have begun to doubt, who have seen many of their fellow-Christians die and are afraid that those believers will somehow miss out on salvation. Paul reassures them that all believers will be saved, that the resurrection of Jesus ensures the resurrection of the faithful. 1Thess 4: 13-18, and then he repeats Jesus' own metaphor for the unexpectedness of his return, coming as a thief in the night (1 Thess 5:2)

In the nearly 2000 years since the death of Jesus, Christians have continued to struggle with how to interpret these passages about the coming of the Kingdom. Over and over some charismatic leader has announced that the day is at hand, some group of faithful sell all their possessions and go wait on a hilltop, and nothing happens, like the Millerites in the 1840s. Many people here might be familiar with Herbert W. Armstrong and the Worldwide Church of God which started in the 1920s. There's a Christian group right now, buying billboards announcing that the date of Jesus' return is May 21 2011. A quick Google search turns up all kinds of websites talking about current events as signs of the End Times, seemingly unaware that Christians have been making these predictions for nearly 2000 years without success, from the early church's communal and ascetic life to Montanus in the 5th century, the end-of-the-

world panic at the end of the first millennium AD to the Shakers in the 18th century, the Wesley brothers of Methodism in the 19th century, and on it goes. The more one looks at this pattern, the harder it is to take it seriously. One ends up with the attitude expressed by a popular tshirt – Jesus is coming, look busy.

I find myself feeling very sorry for Paul and the early church as I read these passages, as they slowly come to realize that the promise they were holding on to was not going to be literally fulfilled, the disappointment and the testing of their faith.

But I've now come to understand these passages differently, and to associate these admonitions to be alert and be accountable to another piece of Jesus' teaching, that when we are ready to help and serve others we are serving the Master, when we are faithful stewards in our dealings with those around us, using the talents we have been given to make the world a better place, then we are being accountable to God. As we've seen, this story in Luke also occurs in Matthew, where it is one of a series of stories Jesus tells about the kingdom of God and how we should live given that the kingdom is at hand. Right after the story of the servants and the talents comes the story which is now my key for understanding when and how God's Kingdom is coming to earth. It's in Matthew 25, starting at verse 31. Those who are being welcomed into the Kingdom are greeted in these words: "I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me into your homes, naked and you clothed me, sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me." The believers are amazed, and say, Lord, when did we do these things for you? He answers, when you did them for the least important of the people around you, you did them for me. The Master comes back to see if the servants are being faithful or dishonest EVERY SINGLE DAY to every believer, the Kingdom of God arrived with the resurrection, and it is our responsibility as Christians to live and work every day to make that Kingdom real on earth. We shouldn't be sitting around waiting for the gates of heaven to open and the golden chariots arrive, we need to be out in the world, feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and caring for the sick. This lies at the heart of what's called the Social Gospel, at the roots of the CCF and the NDP, at the core of United Church theology and its engagement with social justice from the beginning. The Social Gospel movement represented the shift from pure proselytization to making the day to day lives of people better – it sought to improve education, eliminate child labour, clean up slum housing. The YMCA comes out of this movement as well as medical missions, refugee settlement, and even the Civil Rights movement in the US. The slogan "What Would Jesus Do" was coined by a Congregationalist minister more than a hundred years ago, and the key word in that slogan is "DO". Our vision of Christianity is not one of passive withdrawal from an evil world, waiting for our salvation, but of active engagement IN the world. We want to be truly faithful servants ready to give an accounting of ourselves to our Master, but that accounting will be based on how well we have used all that we have been given, on how truly we have lived as citizens of God's Kingdom. We are in a very privileged position compared to most of the world – so what are we doing with that privilege? Enjoying it as though we deserved it? Looking down on those who are without it, or helping them?

The Kingdom of God isn't pie in the sky, it's here and now. The Kingdom of God is UPON US and WE CAN SEE IT EVERYTIME we help someone or take better care of God's creation.