

## SERMON NOTES

Fifth Sunday of Great Lent  
The Judge

Synaxis Gospel  
Luke 17:20-18:14

### CRISIS AND PRAYER

#### INTRODUCTION

During Lent, as we approach Holy Week, our readings have taken us on a journey with our Lord as He traveled to Jerusalem where He laid down His life for our sakes, taking our place on the Cross. During these last weeks of His life, preparing His disciples for their future ministry was very much on His heart. There were so many things that they needed to know: what God expected of them, what they could expect from God. Two thousand years later, the present-day disciples of our Lord, you and I, need the same preparation; we need the same knowledge. The teachings of Christ have been recorded in the Gospels so that we too can travel the road with Him and listen to His words.

Today, we rejoin the journey after Jesus responded to the plea of ten men to cure them of their leprosy. After their health crisis was past, nine went on their way; but one turned back to thank our Lord. Prayer should not be only a cry for help, but also a song of praise.

In our reading from Luke's Gospel, Jesus warns about the days of crisis that are approaching for us and for all mankind. But He also teaches us that we have a loving Father Who is attentive to our prayers and will respond quickly to provide help in our time of need.

We begin with a question from the Pharisees who have been in the crowd with Jesus as He moved ever closer to Jerusalem, the future 'City of the Great King.'

#### SYNAXIS READING

Luke 17:20-18:14

*Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst."*

*And he said to the disciples, "The days shall come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, 'Look there! Look here!' Do not go away, and do not run after them. For just as the lightning, when it flashes out of one part of the sky, shines to the other part of the sky, so will the Son of Man be in His day. But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.*

*And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it shall be also in the days of the Son of Man: they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.*

*It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all.*

*It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, let not the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house go down to take them away; and likewise let not the one who is in the field turn back. Remember Lot's wife.*

*Whoever seeks to keep his life shall lose it, and whoever loses his life shall preserve it. I tell you, on that night there will be two men in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding at the same place, one will be taken and the other will be left. [Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other will be left.]"*

*And answering they said to Him, "Where, Lord?" And He said to them, "Where the body is, there also will the vultures be gathered."*

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying,

*“There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God, and did not respect man. And there was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’*

*And for a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, lest by continually coming she wear me out.’ ”*

*And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”*

*And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:*

*“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, ‘God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’*

*But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’*

*I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.”*

## NOTES

Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and said, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’ For behold the kingdom of God is in your midst.”

The ‘kingdom of God’ is an expectation of a renewed Israel brought about by God. For their sins, Israel, the Old Testament people of God, had been severely punished by the loss of their once great kingdom. Immediately after King David’s grandson took the throne, the kingdom had been divided into two kingdoms because of the sins of David’s son, King Solomon. Both kingdoms were increasingly characterized by sin, and so eventually both were punished by conquest and deportation to foreign lands. The people were scattered.

Although a portion of the people were allowed to return under the Persian ruler Cyrus, and later, in 168 BC, they had established a brief independence under the leadership of the Maccabees,<sup>1</sup> the remnant of the original people of God were, in Jesus’ day, still subject to foreign rule. Their rulers in the first century were the Romans. Most of the people were still scattered in foreign lands.

However, throughout their history, the prophets had called the Hebrew people to repent of their sins and return to God. (The latest of these was John the Baptist.) According to the prophets, if the people would return to God, He promised to restore them to their former glory, a united people in their own land,<sup>2</sup> ruled over by the greatest king the world would ever know, ‘the Son of Man’ Who is divine.<sup>3</sup> With the establishment of that kingdom, the entire world will be at peace with God under His gracious rule. Even the forces of nature and the animal kingdom, whose members will then be at peace with each other, will be reconciled with mankind. Perfect peace and perfect justice will characterize that day.<sup>4</sup>

During the first century of our era, there was high expectation that the time foretold was near. Calculations from the writings of the prophet Daniel led the scholars to believe that the kingdom’s establishment was imminent.<sup>5</sup>

The Pharisees were a sect of the Jews whose study of the Law and the Prophets made them keenly aware of the promises of God concerning the coming kingdom. Apparently, they were hoping for some physical sign of the kingdom’s approach.

The Pharisees have been portrayed as enemies of Jesus. However, this was a topic of extreme interest to them. If they had witnessed the curing of the ten lepers, it might have brought a prophecy of Jeremiah to mind concerning the promised kingdom. In it, God had promised to cure all their diseases that made them outcasts (lepers were outcasts).<sup>6</sup>

The term ‘signs to be observed’ is παρατηρησεως and “was used of astronomical observations, medical diagnosis, etc.”<sup>7</sup> According to Jesus, such visible signs will not herald the kingdom. Moreover, no watchman will announce its arrival.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A history of this period is recorded in the First and Second Book of the Maccabees of the Armenian Bible.

<sup>2</sup> For example see Jeremiah 30-31; Isaiah 54:1-17; Micah 3:12-13.

<sup>3</sup> See Micah 4:7; 5:2-5.

<sup>4</sup> See Micah 4:1-4; Isaiah 11:1-10.

<sup>5</sup> See Daniel 7:9-14 and 9:24-25. However they seemed to have overlooked that in verse 26, Daniel prophesies that the foretold king will be killed (cut off).

<sup>6</sup> See Jeremiah 30:17.

<sup>7</sup> William F. Arndt, *Concordia Classic Commentary Series, Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956) p. 373.

However, in the person of the King—Jesus Christ—the kingdom was already in their midst.<sup>9</sup>

And he said to the disciples, “The days shall come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.

Jesus turned back to the disciples to prepare them for the crisis they must endure before He returns to take His kingdom.<sup>10</sup> During difficult days, they will long for the kingdom’s establishment on earth, but it will not come in their day.

“Son of Man” is the title used in Daniel 7 for the One to Whom God gives the kingdom. It is the title Jesus most often used of himself.

And they will say to you, ‘Look there! Look here!’ Do not go away, and do not run after them. For just as the lightning, when it flashes out of one part of the sky, shines to the other part of the sky, so will the Son of Man be in His day.

They, people, will be spreading rumors about the Kingdom. False prophets and men claiming to be Christ will come, but the disciples should not believe that it is He. When Jesus does return, it will be as sudden, and as apparent to all, as is a lightning flash across the sky. No one will need to be told.

But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

Before that great day, He will suffer and be crucified, rejected by the Jews.<sup>11</sup> He must be crucified and die for the salvation of His people. Without the payment for their sins, Jesus would have no people in His kingdom.

And just as it happened in the days of Noah, so it shall be also in the days of the Son of Man: they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.

Returning to the topic of the return of the King (the Son of Man), Jesus described the conditions of that future time as being quite normal. People will be engaging in everyday activities and happy social celebrations, just as they did before disaster hit the people of Noah’s day.<sup>12</sup>

It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all.<sup>13</sup>

Another account in Genesis tells of a disaster that destroyed the cities of the plain. Sodom was one of those cities. Angels saved the only righteous man, Lot, who was living in Sodom. They led Lot and his daughters

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Arndt discusses the term εντος υμων εστιν as ‘in your midst’ or ‘within you,’ on pp. 373-74.

<sup>10</sup> St Paul speaks of the suffering that had already begun for the Christians in Romans 8:35-39. But they were more than conquerors through Christ.

<sup>11</sup> Many times Jesus warned His disciples of His approaching death. See, for example, Matthew 16:21 and Luke 9:22, Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34.

<sup>12</sup> For the story of Noah and the Flood see Genesis 9:1-6 ff.

<sup>13</sup> For the story of Lot see Genesis 19:1-26.

out of the city before the fire fell. Jesus stressed that normal life and the usual economic activities were being pursued at that time.

**It will be just the same on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, let not the one who is on the housetop and whose goods are in the house go down to take them away; and likewise let not the one who is in the field turn back.**

**Remember Lot's wife.**

Normal activities will be going on when the Son of Man, the King, returns as well. Then judgment will fall. It will be sudden, with no warning signs whatsoever.

Jesus warns His disciples to be prepared. We must not be found to be double minded. Material possessions must not be a matter that concerns us at that moment, but only the sight of our blessed Lord and Savior.

Lot's wife would have been saved with her husband and daughters but she turned back to see the city of her former way of living. She was turned to a pillar of salt. We must not be like Lot's wife.

**Whoever seeks to keep his life shall lose it, and whoever loses his life shall preserve it.**

Being prepared involves a decision about one's most valuable possession, one's physical life. Those who cling to it, putting its preservation first and at all costs, will lose his life, that is, his soul. On the other hand, those who are willing to give up even their physical lives for Christ and His kingdom will preserve their souls. We must put God first before all things, even our own life.

**I tell you, on that night there will be two men in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding at the same place, one will be taken and the other will be left. [Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other will be left.]”**

On that day, close association of family or friends will not save us. Salvation is a personal issue. It is a one on one relationship with God. According to the parallel Matthew passage, angels will be sent to collect God's servants to safety before the judgment falls—as with Noah and with Lot.

Jesus gave an example of men and an example of women, an example of night time and of day time. Grinding grain for bread was a daytime activity.

The sentence in brackets is not found in the best manuscripts and may have been included by a scribe because Matthew has it in a parallel passage.<sup>14</sup>

**And answering they said to Him, “Where, Lord?” And He said to them, “Where the body is, there also will the vultures be gathered.”**

Apparently, after hearing Jesus' description of the separation of those who will be saved from those who will not be saved, the disciples asked, ‘Where?’ Where will this take place?

This question is not found in the parallel Matthew passage. There, this separation takes place in the daytime. Here, Jesus says it happens at night, but also in the day. Though Matthew did not, Luke recorded both statements. These statements probably puzzled the disciples. Where in the world is night and day experienced at the same moment? They did not know what we know, the world is round and when the sun shines brightly on one side, it is dark on the other. The entire world is included in the judgment at the same moment.

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew 24:40.

The spiritually dead will attract the vultures of destruction. The vultures, or those which live off carrion, are often used as figures of judgment.<sup>15</sup> The answer to the disciples' question is: one will know where, when one observes where the judgment is falling.

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying,

Jesus had described a difficult future for the disciples before His return. History has proven the truth of His words. Christians, beginning in the first century until our own, have suffered horribly and have longed for His return in their day.

But now He encourages them with a story that illustrates how persistent they need to be in prayer. They must not give up in discouragement.

“There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God, and did not respect man. And there was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’”

There are two people contrasted in this story. One is great and powerful, a judge, who had no respect for anyone, not God, not man.

The other is a widow. In that culture, widows were defenseless and vulnerable. It is for that reason, that God had made them and orphans objects of His particular concern.<sup>16</sup> He had commanded that they be cared for. This one has come to the judge for protection against some adversary. She did not give up and kept coming again and again.

And for a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, lest by continually coming she wear me out.’”

The judge was not filling his proper role as a judge in obedience to God. His concern should have been for justice and defense of the helpless. But he did not fear God or care about people. This is why Jesus called him ‘unrighteous.’ He was not acting as a true and proper judge should.

But because of her persistence, he finally does his duty.

The term translated “Wear me out” comes from the same kind of colloquial expression as our “Knock me out.” Or I’m knocked out!” It literally means ‘to give a black eye.’

And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily.

The story was told to illustrate for the disciples a judge who is the very opposite of God. But even such a one as this judge will grant a request for someone that he cares nothing for, if he or she is persistent and does not give up. How much more will not God respond to the cries of His beloved ones when they face overpowering evil? Will He delay His response? The answer to both is an expected, “Certainly not!”

A survey of the Old and New Testament usages of the term “elect” indicates it means ‘ones chosen to serve’ or ‘chosen to be servants.’ Christians have been chosen, like the Old Testament Israelites, to serve

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<sup>15</sup> See Ezekiel 30:17 and Habakkuk 1:8 for the use of this metaphor.

<sup>16</sup> Laws were given for their protection and support: Deuteronomy 14:28-29. See also Psalm 68:5.

God in His plan to save all who will turn to Him in repentance. Every Christian has been given a special part to play in that great endeavor.

### However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

What kind of faith is meant? Is it the kind of faith that trusts that God will hear and help? Is it the kind of faith that trusts in Jesus as their Savior from the penalty of sin?

That Jesus precedes the statement with *however* or actually *nevertheless*, seems to tie the statement to the fact that God will quickly respond to the cries of His people who truly serve Him.

Yet He follows the statement with another parable that teaches on the immediate response of God to forgive those who repent.

Perhaps both are meant—the true Christian faith of those who believe that God loves them and will forgive them when they repent, like the tax-collector, and will also hear and respond to their cries for help in a crisis, like that of the thankful leper. When Jesus returns, will this faith no longer be found on earth?

Perhaps this faith will have been replaced by another faith. Perhaps it will be that of the self-righteous Pharisee in the following parable, a lover of pomp and ceremony, who recognizes the existence of God but sees no need of repentance. His faith is in himself and for himself.

Sadly, Jesus knew that He will find most going about their normal social and business activities totally ignoring God. The Greek form of Jesus' question expects a negative response.

**For the notes on the following verses, Luke 18:9-14,  
please see the notes for "The Fifth Sunday of Advent."**

And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, ‘God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, be he who humbles himself shall be exalted.”

Our reading is concluded with this parable. It is also on prayer in a crisis. This crisis is that of a sinful soul desperately needing forgiveness. Jesus assures us that all such prayers will be heard and the penitent will be immediately forgiven. But the one who is proud and does not recognize his sinfulness will not be heard or forgiven.

## APPLICATION

Everyone faces many crisis situations in their lifetime. We have medical and health emergencies, financial and employment needs, education needs—for ourselves or for our loved ones—as well



as concerns about the safety of our family and friends when they travel. We also face the eventual emotional trauma of bereavement. In all of these and more, our Lord wants us to know that help from our heavenly Father is only a prayer away.

In our reading for today, Jesus speaks of two other crisis situations, one of which is very familiar to our people—persecution. The other is the judgment that will someday fall on all those who have rejected His loving call to repent and come to a living relationship with Him. This relationship requires that we put Him absolutely first in our lives and thoughts. Not money, not possessions, not family, and not even our own lives can come before our love for Him. We all come short of this goal sometimes, but when we do and repent, He is ever ready to forgive us and cleanse us from all our sins, restoring us to a right relationship with Him—just as he did the repentant tax-gatherer in our reading. All of us who love our God will be safely under His protection when the crisis of judgment falls.

Jesus also briefly referred to the crisis of persecution. Jesus suffered for the sake of His kingdom. We are not greater than our Lord and we are warned that we too will suffer, sometimes so horribly that we will long for the day of His return and the end of it all. The disciples experienced persecution just as Jesus foretold, but they were prepared and with constant prayer they endured for the sake of our Lord and for His kingdom.

Yesterday, in our church, we remembered the Forty Martyrs of Sebastia:

“The Forty Martyrs were Armenian Christians who were soldiers in the eastern garrison of the Roman army during the reign of Emperor Licinius in 320 AD. At this time the Emperor had (sic) initiated a major persecution of Christians throughout the Empire.

When the Armenian youths were found to be Christian, and repeatedly refused to renounce their faith, they were subjected to grueling and horrible tortures. Finally, they were stripped of their clothing and cast into the freezing waters of a pond on the outskirts of the western Armenian town of Sebastia on a bitter cold winter night. To further tantalize the youths, guards had set up cauldrons of hot water on the shore, hoping to lure the young men to reject their public profession of Christianity. One of the youths did yield but as he set foot on solid ground he collapsed dead.

Immediately one of the guards saw a miraculous, brilliant light shining above the heads of the martyrs. Convinced that this was a sign from God, the guard proclaimed his faith in Christ and ran into the water, becoming the fortieth holy martyr.”<sup>17</sup>

The remembrance of the Forty Martyrs should give us pause to think of our other martyrs who suffered death rather than renounce their faith in Jesus Christ, those who died in the Armenian

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<sup>17</sup> St. Nersess Seminary Press Release of March 5, 2005.

Genocide. They were like the martyred Christian missionary who, perhaps thinking of our reading, wrote, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” We cannot keep our physical life; someday it will be gone. At that time, we will keep none of our other possessions as well. Why should we hold those to be of more value than our spiritual life with our God?

In our reading, Jesus calls us to be prepared for the judgment day that will come as suddenly as a flash of lightning. It will be a normal day, with no warning, when He returns and judgment on our world will fall as surely as it did on the world of Noah and the city of Sodom. Being prepared for that day by having a living relationship with our God will also find us prepared for persecution, and for all other crises that we may face.

Our Lord knew what lay ahead. He knew it would be hard and difficult to follow Him in the midst of trials and troubles. But in the parable of the Judge, he taught us that our heavenly Father listens to our prayers. He will help us quickly by either granting our request or something better—we do know what is God’s best for us— or, granting us endurance to persevere for the kingdom’s sake. Remember, a soul was saved because thirty-nine martyrs endured.

During these last weeks of Lent, may we search our hearts and see if we are indeed prepared. Are we truly thankful that God manifested Himself in Jesus Christ to die for our sins that we might live in Him and with Him? Are we truly repentant that we have disobeyed Him or allowed anything or anyone to be more important to us than our God and Savior? If so, no crisis can overwhelm us, for our God is with us, and He responds quickly to our prayers.