

A simplistic or cursory reading of today's Epistle and Gospel passages may give some naive Christians the joy of knowing exactly what will happen when Jesus returns again to the world. I say it will give them joy because they believe, as Jesus returns again they will be entering into the "rapture" as some American fundamentalists firmly believe. That is to say saints will be snatched up to heaven leaving behind them the rest of the world going to hell.

So I have a rather difficult task to convince you the Parable of the Ten Virgins is not about Jesus' own teaching on His coming back to earth. To begin with, what does this parable add to the repeated warnings Jesus has already given about the need to be ready? Of course, it expresses again Jesus' emphasis on wakefulness.

This story is rooted in the Jewish tradition of contrasting wisdom and folly – being sensible or being silly. The writer of Proverbs treats wisdom and folly as two women, and describes them calling out to men going by, and offering them their respective lifestyles.

Now, in this story, Lady Wisdom and Mistress Folly have each become five young girls, and the story invites its hearers to decide which they'd rather be. Obviously, wisdom in this case means being ready with the oil for the lamp, and the folly means not thinking about it until it's too late. All the girls in this parable, including the "wise" ones, go to sleep in v.5, whereas in v.13 Jesus tells His followers to stay awake.

So why is it so important to be ready at all time? Is it to be ready for Jesus' coming back to earth after His ascension? I don't think this is what Jesus actually taught in this Parable. Already in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has referred to himself as the bridegroom (9:15). In a previous parable, Jesus spoke of the Kingdom as being like a king making a marriage feast for his son (22.2). Mention of a bridegroom hints again at Jesus' messiahship, which was of course a central issue in the previous chapters, ever since Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. In other words, Jesus' Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins is a warning to His hearers whether they are ready to accept and welcome Him as their Messiah in their midst.

This highlights the fact that the Parable isn't just about the very end of time, the great and terrible day for which the world and church still await.

Even in our own time this Parable has its significant meaning to the unbelieving world. Although most folks in the world know the word "Christ" they do not accept and believe in Jesus as Christ. The Parable reminds us that the church has an urgent task to proclaim the Good News to the world that Jesus is indeed the Christ. We have the duty to warn them if they are not ready to accept Jesus as Christ their outcome will be like the Five Foolish Virgins.

Now let us turn to the Epistle reading of the day. As far as I can think of, nowhere in the New Testament is there a better description of what is going to happen in Jesus' coming again than Paul's description in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

In Paul's description of Jesus' second coming, we notice he actually borrows two different images from the Old Testament and one contemporary image to describe this future event. First, there is the Sinai picture of Israel's leaders going up the mountain to meet Moses who is coming down with the law. Second, '*caught up in the cloud*' of v.17 clearly is a reference to Daniel 7 where God's people are vindicated and exalted '*on the cloud.*' Third, the sound of God's trumpet is very likely modelled on Caesar coming to a city, where the fanfare sounds and the nobles and dignitaries go out to meet him and escort him in. What can we learn from Paul's description?

First, it reminds us, there is nothing we can do to hasten Jesus' coming again. By the way, some Christians might be happy that the pandemic happens in their life's time because they believe Jesus will definitely return to their midst after the pandemic. Hence, they will not taste death. I think this pandemic does not happen by natural means, it is a terrible human mistake. Jesus' return is completely His own initiative. Other more progressive Christians also have wrong ideas. They keep saying that once our building of the Kingdom of God on earth is complete, Jesus will return. No, there is nothing we can do to contribute to his coming. Of course we are commanded to spread the Gospel all over the world. Even then it is not for us to say whether we have completely spread the Gospel all over the world.

Second, the three noises of v.16 have a very important role to play, apart from announcing that Jesus comes again; they awake the faithful departed. Hearing these voices, they will rise from the dead. Early on Paul has told us that the death of a Christian is no more than asleep. These three voices therefore act as if they were an alarm clock to wake up those asleep.

So the dead rise from sleep to meet the Lord. But notice what Paul writes in vs.16-17. There is a very important point here often overlooked in this verse. There will be a reunion before the dead meet with the Lord. Paul writes, *'the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.'* Notice carefully what Paul says. The dead and the living will meet before being caught up in the air to meet the Lord. Sometimes, especially when we lose our dear ones, although we believe we shall meet again, we just wonder how we shall meet again. What a precious thought to us, knowing that we shall never meet with our Lord alone. We shall meet the Lord with our dear ones.

How shall we, i.e. those who are still alive be caught up? Paul does not tell us how. He simply states what will happen! We shall be caught up in the air. We often tend to think that when Jesus returns, He shall come to us on earth. But Paul said that we shall meet the Lord, with the dead, in the air. Why in the air?

Two points about the meeting place being in the air. First, in Paul's time, the air was often thought of as the dwelling place of demons. In Ephesians 2:2, Paul describes Satan as 'the ruler of the powers of the air.' Therefore, as a writer puts it, 'The fact that the Lord chooses to meet His saints there, on the demon's home ground so to speak, shows something of His complete mastery over them.'

Second, following on the first point, the New Testament also tells us that we shall rule over the world with Jesus. Together with Jesus, we shall judge the world also. There will be no more prominent position of ruling and judging the world than in the air. The basis that we can rule and judge the world is because the ruler of the world, Satan, has already been judged by Jesus.

So finally, Paul writes, 'Therefore comfort one another with these words.' We may say to Paul, "Your words about Jesus coming do not comfort us at all, rather it confuse us with so many new ideas we never know before."

Let us be clear: at this point in the passage Paul is dealing with the question of bereavement. And in helping to have a right attitude to it, Paul brings in the Last Things. Jesus' coming again and all that associates with it, is no pure academic issue for Paul. It serves the purpose of comforting the bereaved. That is why at the end of this passage he has these words in v.18.

It was discovered early last century a second century letter of condolence, written by a Egyptian lady named Irene, to a couple whose son had died. She is

very sorry, she says. She weeps over her friend's lost relative, as she has herself recently wept over the loss of her dear one (possibly her husband or son). She and her family have done everything they can in the circumstances. 'But nevertheless', she concludes with despair, 'against such things one can do nothing. Therefore, comfort one another. Farewell.'

But Paul's 'comfort one another' is built upon these words, i.e., the coming of the Lord Jesus. This is our hope against all odds. Every one of us will face bereavement sooner or later, but we have these comfortable words offered to one another. One day we will meet with our dear ones and then together we will meet with our Lord for ever.