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The Kingdom of Heaven or the New Age¹

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Text: Matthew 25:1-13

I think I should begin with a confession: First, I haven't the faintest idea what the present talk about "new age" is all about. But then, I haven't really moved into the "post modern world" yet. I am still struggling to catch up with the modern world, because I spend most of my waking hours in the pre-modern or early modern world. Perhaps this also explains my difficulties with our preordained text. Secondly, I must confess that this story about wise and foolish teenage girls is not my favorite parable.

What exactly is this parable trying to tell us about the kingdom of God, or the dawn of a new age, if you like? According to earlier New Testament scholars, parables were intended to make a single point, a point easily grasped by the audience. But the same scholars cannot agree what single point some of the parables intended to make. The original point appears to have been lost in the transmission of the texts. Our parable of the wise and foolish virgins is a case in point.

The historical situation reflected in the parable seems easier to reconstruct than its intended point. Jesus used an upper-class wedding in order to make an observation about the coming of the kingdom of God. According to the custom of his day, weddings were occasions for major celebrations. The day was spent in festivities, dancing, and other entertainments at the bride's home. The marriage ceremony and the main banquet were customarily scheduled for the cool of the evening or nightfall at the bridegroom's parental house. But before that could happen the bridegroom was expected to come and fetch

the bride from her home to his. A messenger would precede the bridegroom and announce the approach of his coming. At that point the young virgins, 14 to 16 year olds belonging to the bride's party, were expected to go out in order to greet and meet the bridegroom and his entourage. The young maids, torches or lamps in hand in order to light up and guide the way, would then lead the bridegroom first to the house of the bride. The joined wedding party would then, with bride and bridegroom in its midst, move on to the bridegroom's house where the marriage ceremony and the banquet followed.

In the parable told by Jesus the bridegroom was delayed. He did not come till midnight. Apparently such delays were not unusual because of the customary formality of last minute negotiations between parents of groom and bride. Normally the parents of the bride were at fault for the delay, because delay emphasized the value of the bride and the reluctance of her parents to give her away.

Meanwhile, according to our parable the young bridesmaids, tired of waiting, had fallen asleep. They were aroused at midnight by cries that the bridegroom was approaching. And now precisely at the dramatic high point of the story Jesus enters a dissonant note. Only half of the bridesmaids were equipped for their task to go out and meet the bridegroom, bring him to the house of the bride, and then proceed to the home of the bridegroom. The wise virgins were prepared for the delay. They had brought extra oil for their lamps. The wise ones refused to share their resources with the foolish ones who were short of oil and now, in the middle of the night, were scrambling to find an open oil station. As a result they missed the procession. And when they arrived late at the bridegroom's house, the ceremony and the banquet were in progress and their request for entry was met rather rudely with: "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you."

What a petty ending! So much for the party! All because of a little oil or the lack of it! Or was it all because of a gruff bouncer at the gate? "I don't know you!" What kind of a cruel joke is this!? Of course he knew them. Did the wise virgins put him up to this? Who needs enemies when you have wise friends like that, who make sure they're in and leave you out!

How exactly does this story of a wedding gone wrong, of non-sharing, of the petty lockout of half of the bridesmaids,

illustrate the kingdom of God, or the coming of a new age? Whatever happened to love of one's neighbor in this parable? Or to the unconditional love of God at the heart of the Gospel? Give me the parable of the Prodigal Son; of the Lost Sheep; of the Feast that brought in the "poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame", from which the wealthy and healthy had excluded themselves with silly excuses. Now *there* is Gospel, *there* is good news, a new-age message of lost and found, of reconciliation. But what of this parable of the wise and the foolish, the smart and the stupid? Where lies the emphasis? What part should we emphasize? I need a little help here!

Is the emphasis to be placed on the wedding feast as a whole, namely, that the kingdom will be a great, joyful celebration, something really to look forward to? Then what about the simple minded ones who were left out? Some scholars have sought to get around the problem by suggesting that celebration was indeed the core message of the parable, but that this core was reinterpreted by the Gospel writer or the early church with an eye for the second coming.

In that case, does the focus shift to the locked door? A similar story in Luke 13:25 tells also of a closed door and being locked out. Is the point, then, that some will be locked out of the kingdom?

Or is the emphasis to be placed on the delay of the bridegroom and the delay of the kingdom?

Or was it the intention of Matthew to emphasize the unexpected suddenness of the coming? Was the main point a reminder to remain alert, to await diligently the coming kingdom? But *all* slept! In this the wise and the foolish were alike.

Does this mean that the emphasis should be placed on preparedness? On having enough oil?

One could go on. And a glance at how the parable was interpreted by the early church does not prove all that helpful either. Evidence indicates that some in the early church interpreted the foolish maids as referring to Israel, the wise as referring to the Gentiles who joined the Messianic community of Jesus' followers. In this scenario the parable was interpreted in the light of Jesus' first coming, the rejection by his own people and the subsequent mission to the Gentiles. The notion of

the parousia, or the second coming in judgment,² was not a determining element in this interpretation.³ Why would Jesus speak in parables about the second coming when his disciples still had difficulties understanding his first mission?

Of course, Jesus' contemporaries were filled with expectations of a coming messianic kingdom, a new age. And it would have been easy for Jesus' followers to reinterpret the original anticipation of change in the direction of a second coming. It must be recalled that in Jesus' day meetings in synagogues closed with: "May God rule his kingdom in your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the whole house of Israel, speedily and soon. And to this, say Amen" (so be it).⁴

The prayer indicates the heightened Messianic expectations current among Jesus' contemporaries. The coming Messiah was expected to restore Israel, to right the social wrongs among its people; foreign and internal oppression would cease and justice rule. The New Testament records how Pharisees questioned Jesus about the signs of the coming kingdom. Jesus responded: "The kingdom of God does not come with signs to be observed." Pay no attention to those who claim "here or there it is". And then he made the most astonishing statement: "Behold, the kingdom of God is already among you." All of this suggests that Jesus taught that the kingdom was a present reality in his own time. A number of his other parables illustrate that point: E.g., the parable of the leaven doing its invisible work in a large batch of dough,⁵ or God's mysterious power at work in the tiny mustard seed.

In light of the above it seems clear that Jesus taught the present reality of the kingdom in and for his own age. He used the wedding feast as a metaphor for the joy and excitement that came with the realization of the kingdom. Matthew or the early church reinterpreted the parable with the second coming in mind. Hence the stern warning at the end: "Watch..for you know neither the day nor hour." A warning Matthew apparently intended no longer for Israel but for the Christian community, which he considered a rather mixed lot in need of a stern apocalyptic warning.

And what does this really tell us about a coming new age? Surely if Gospel is good news it is the news that the kingdom is in process. Erring sheep are brought home; the Father's

house is open to the prodigal child; the poor, the lame and the beggars are summoned to the banquet; the kingdom of God is mysteriously present in our midst. Eschatology, the new age, is being realized.

But, you may ask, is there any historical evidence for that? Do not the present and the coming kingdom seem further away than ever in our secular post-modern world? I would like to answer with a story.

In August of 1996 I visited the city of Leipzig. It has many historic sites and I saw some of them, among them the pub where, according to medieval legend and according to Wolfgang Goethe, Dr. Faustus made a pact with the devil. And, of course, I also visited the site where Martin Luther debated John Eck in 1519. I sat in the St. Thomas Church where Johannes Sebastian Bach premiered many of his compositions. But I was especially drawn to the nearby church of St. Nicholas. What intrigued me was not its architectural fame. With foundations dating from 1165, the church has undergone numerous renovations so that it has become a show case for the evolution of various architectural styles and is considered one of the most important historical monuments in the recently united Germany. But what interested me was the role which this church played in the collapse of the communist regime of East Germany.

The story begins in the early 1980s which saw the growth of a major peace movement in West Germany. During this period huge demonstrations took place against the arms build-up in the two Germanies. While the communist regime in East Germany encouraged such demonstrations in the West, it felt them to be unnecessary, in fact forbade them, in the East. Young people in communist East Germany (GDR) concerned with peace issues had no forum to meet and discuss their concerns, until some pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church braved the wrath of the communist authorities and opened their churches to special prayer for peace gatherings. A Christian youth group in Leipzig decided to hold these peace prayer services regularly every Monday in the St. Nicholas church. The pastor of the church who hosted the meetings encouraged former "Bausoldaten", persons who when drafted into military had chosen alternative service, to take leadership of the discussions. At first attendance was very small and hence of little

concern to the communist government and its State Security Services (STASI).

But in 1988 and especially in 1989 attendance began to increase. The reasons were not purely religious. It seems that more and more people dissatisfied with life under the communist regime sought exit visas, but instead of receiving permission to leave they lost their jobs, were harassed by the STASI, shunned by friends and even family who were afraid to offend the authorities by associating with these social outcasts. Frustrated, the persecuted would-be emigrants, with no place to go and no one to share their stories, joined the already existing peace-prayer meetings. Here they received a hearing and formed support groups.

But by opening its doors to these political and social outcasts the church found itself in a tenuous position vis-a-vis the communist regime. Similarly it found itself also in the unenviable position of having to mediate between the religious and secular agendas of those who now attended the weekly peace prayer meetings. Most of the would-be emigrants were non-Christians. And while these prayer meetings lost some of their churchly atmosphere, the spirit of peace and good will prevailed.

Because Saint Nicholas church had opened its doors to would-be emigrants, considered traitors by the regime, it found itself at the center of events that began to unravel in October of 1989. Since early 1989 the prayer-for-peace services filled the church every Monday evening. Not surprisingly the government took note! From May 1989 on, every Monday the access roads to Saint Nicholas were blocked by police check points. The pastor and church authorities were put under pressure to move the prayer meetings from Saint Nicholas in the heart of the city to a church in the outlying area. When they refused, harassment increased; participants in the prayer-for-peace meetings were routinely arrested and placed under "temporary detention". But this only led to an increase in attendance, so that by the fall of 1989 the 2,000 seats in Saint Nicholas were no longer sufficient to hold all who wanted to attend. It became customary for hundreds to wait outside and then join a peaceful procession from the church to the centre of the city of Leipzig. I don't know when it began, but the participants came equipped with candles so that their procession lit up the night!

Then came Black Saturday, 7 October. The communist regime had made extensive preparations for the 40th anniversary celebration of the founding of the GDR, which fell on that day. But these celebrations were overshadowed by the escape of thousands of young East-Germans through a hole in the Iron Curtain between Hungary and Austria. Thousands more had sought refuge in embassies in Poland and Czechoslovakia. The East German government responded to these embarrassing events by closing the borders with its eastern neighbors. Even more disconcerting for the communists were previously unheard of public demonstrations in East Germany for the right to emigrate. The government led by Erich Honecker announced that it would make no concessions whatever but would put an end to "counter-revolution", if need be by force. In fact Honecker alluded to a Tiananmen Square solution! And so Saturday, 7 October, which was supposed to be a day of celebration for the regime, turned into "Black Saturday", because on this day for ten hours police battered peaceful demonstrators, who made no attempt to fight back, demanding only the right to leave the country legally. Hundreds were arrested.

Two days later, 9 October 1989, was another regular Monday with a prayer-for-peace service scheduled at St. Nicholas. No one could have predicted that this prayer meeting would mark a turning point in the history of the communist regime. The government had mobilized some 1,000 (SED) communist party members to invade Saint Nicholas church. As early as 2:00 pm some 600 had filed into the nave of the church. They were joined by STASI agents who had attended regularly in good numbers since the spring. Later the pastor who led the peace prayer meetings wrote:

I always regarded as positive the fact that countless members of the STASI Monday after Monday heard the Beatitudes...Where else would they hear them? And so it was that these people heard Jesus Christ's gospel which they did not know...They heard...*"Blessed are the poor!"* and not *"Anyone with money is happy."* *"Love your enemies"* instead of *"Down with your opponents."* *"Many who now are first will be last"* and not *"Everything stays the same."* *"For whosoever will save his life shall lose it and whoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it"* and not *"Take care of yourself first."* *"You are the salt!"* not *"You are the cream."*⁶

This was the Gospel that the 1,000 members of the communist party heard—some, no doubt, for the first time. It must

have struck them as a message from another world. Those who had sent them to disrupt the meeting had miscalculated the impact of the Gospel and the present working of the Spirit. According to the presiding pastor the service proceeded with "unbelievable calm and concentration" (Rev. C. Führer). After the benediction this strange congregation of communist atheists and the odd believing Christian, who had managed to squeeze into the church that evening, stepped out into the square lit up by tens of thousands of candles. As this curious procession of about 50,000 moved toward the city centre, the crowd grew to an estimated one hundred and fifty thousand. Police and troops who had been readied to deal with the "hooligans", the official label for those at odds with the government, moved in but found that the candle bearers needed both hands to keep the candles from going out. They had neither stone nor club. Disarmed by the obviously peaceful intentions of the demonstrators who engaged them in conversation, police and troops withdrew. The pastor of Saint Nicholas put it this way:

Jesus' spirit of non-violence seized the masses and became a material, peaceful power. It was an evening in the spirit of our Lord Jesus for there were no victors or vanquished; none triumphed over the other; no one lost face. Hundreds of thousands were in the street around the city center. Yet not one shop window was broken. The incredible experience of the power of non-violence.

The atmosphere obviously affected the provocateurs planted among the demonstrators. Even these agents of violence lost heart. A member of the ruling Central Committee later stated: "We had planned everything. We were prepared for everything, but not for candles and prayers."

This non-violent movement ushered in the collapse of the communist regime and its ideological dictatorship. Erich Honecker, once all powerful, had become a liability to his own party and had to seek shelter with a Lutheran pastor.

And what of the aftermath? Surely the collapse of communism did not usher in the kingdom of God. Indeed, the demise of the old command economy has brought high unemployment, job insecurity, and other hardships. Not surprisingly, disappointment and dissatisfaction run high in former East Germany as the benefits of capitalism, like the second coming, have been postponed.

And what is happening at the Saint Nicholas church? With the original crisis past, attendance at the peace prayer meetings has declined. But the church leadership has responded to

the new problems with a program for the unemployed. Above all, Saint Nicholas remains a place where the Gospel and the parables of the kingdom are preached. As the pastor put it: Saint Nicholas “remains a house of hope, a refuge and nucleus of the new departure.”

Elsewhere on my visit to former East Germany I found symbols of that hope and new departure. As I entered the monumental nave of the Cathedral (Dom) in Magdeburg my Protestant eyes fell on a field of flickering candles located on the draughty floor in a corner of the church. Previously I had seen such a massive display of candles only in Roman Catholic churches. As I approached this memorial to past and continued hope, I saw a young woman and child rekindling candles extinguished by the draught. Crouching beside them, I overheard the mother instruct her daughter in prayer for peace.

And this brings me to a conclusion of sorts: With eyes of faith we see a new age present and coming. From time to time we are permitted overt glimpses of God’s work among us. But God’s ways are not our ways; God’s work is not confined to our sectarian corners. Nevertheless, God’s promises are sure: the good, the true and the just will ultimately triumph.

Let me close with an adapted version of the prayer Jesus and his disciples heard in the synagogue: May God rule his kingdom in our age, in our lives, and in our communities. Amen.

Notes

- 1 This mediation was given at the chapel of Conrad Grebel College, University of Waterloo, 13 November 1996.
- 2 Parousia is the technical term for the second coming in glory, to judge and to establish the kingdom. In the original Greek the word meant both “coming” and “presence”. The first three Gospels emphasize the coming in judgment, the cataclysmic end of the age, an emphasis also found in Paul’s epistles and the Book of Revelation. The Gospel of John seems to emphasize the presence of Christ and kingdom; the possibility of spiritual transformation. In either case, the notion of a parousia expresses the conviction that history has an end, a goal, a divine purpose.
- 3 Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (SCM, rev. ed., 1963) 171.
- 4 John W. Miller, *Step by Step Through the Parables* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981) 32.
- 5 Three measures would be about 50 pounds of dough, enough to feed 100 people.
- 6 While visiting the church I picked up a pamphlet entitled “St. Nicholas at Leipzig”. The pamphlet consists of three parts: 1) “A Short Architectural History” by Dr. A. Haubold; 2) “Peace Prayer Services at

St. Nicholas" by Superintendent F. Magirus; and 3) "The Events in Fall 1989" by Rev. C. Führer. The quotations come from Führer's contribution to the pamphlet.