

Our two readings this evening are much more closely connected that they might appear on first hearing. Let me begin with the passage from Isaiah. Firstly let us look at timelines. The book of Isaiah is determined by scholars to have three sections: Chapter 1 to 39 written by the prophet Isaiah himself between 720 and 680 BCE; Chapters 40 – 55 written by an unknown prophet during Judah's exile in Babylon between 550 and 538 BCE; and Chapters 56 – 66 written by a later prophet or school of prophets after a return from exile. Our reading this evening clearly comes from the first section. To understand the passage we need to remember a few things about history. After Solomon died in 931 BCE, under his son Rehoboam, Israel and Judah split creating the so called Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. Israel, the Northern Kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians around 722 BCE. Many of its people were driven into exile; others who remained in time intermarried and became assimilated with gentiles. Giving rise to the lost ten tribes of Israel. Judah meanwhile remained independent with primarily members of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. It is these people who became the Jews of history and, indeed, the Jews of the present day.

Chapter 9 of Isaiah begins with very familiar language. Isaiah is prophesying to the people of Judah. The chapter begins with *But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish...The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light*. It is a prediction that the Messiah will come. By verse 8, the beginning of the passage we heard read, even as he prophesies the arrival of the Messiah, Isaiah is using the experience of Israel attributing its fall to Assyria to pride and arrogance of heart to caution Judah against bringing on the same punishment that befell Israel: *...the Lord raised adversaries against them...and they devoured Israel with open mouth*. It is a warning against self-reliance and ignoring the will and the presence of God.

It is a sad footnote to our reading from Isaiah that Judah did suffer a similar fate to Israel. Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian emperor conquered Jerusalem in 587 destroying much of the city including the Temple. We are used to thinking that the Jews were all exiled to Babylon, in fact the evidence shows that it was only the elites, those in leadership positions in state and temple who were exiled. Again in keeping with Isaiah's message in our reading: *So the Lord cut off from Israel head and tail...elders and dignitaries are the head, and prophets who teach lies are the tail*. The major difference between the experience of Israel and that of Judah is the Judean exile did not result in major assimilation. Even those Jews who remained in exile retained their Jewish identity even until today.

So what is the connexion between the passage from Isaiah and the passage from Matthew. The heading from our passage in the NRSV is *The Faithful or the Unfaithful Slave*. Matthew has Jesus drawing a distinction between two slaves while their master is away: one continues his work, ensures that all is in order, and that all have the food they need. In short, all as though the master was present. The other slave goofs off, treats his fellow slaves badly, indulges himself in drunkenness and gluttony. When the master comes the faithful slave will be rewarded. But the

faithless slave when the master comes *He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

Pride and arrogance caused the downfall of Israel and arrogant self-indulgence caused the downfall of the unfaithful slave.

Just as those who awaited the coming of the Messiah in Isaiah's day were required to expectantly be about God's business in the world, so we who expect the return of Jesus must be about Jesus' work in the world. God has given us responsibilities which like the faithful slave we must meet. In Matthew's Gospel right before the passage we heard read under the heading The Necessity for Watchfulness, the following is written: *Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*

Watchfulness and being ready is not a passive state. We are not supposed be like miserable, passive commuters standing in place in the rain unsure of when or if the wretched bus will come. We are supposed to be watchfully, but fully engaged in going about Jesus work in the world. Feeding the poor, caring for the sick, teaching God's truth, avoiding complacency and avoiding living as though Christ will never come, loving our neighbour as ourselves that is what Jesus is demanding of us in this passage in Matthew and in so many other places in the scripture.

As I was preparing this homily, I took a break for a cup of tea. While drinking my tea, I read a review in The London Review of Books of two biographies of John Lewis the American Civil Rights leader and later congressman. The review quoted something Lewis wrote as he was dying in 2020. *Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part....* Well one could easily substitute being a Christian for Democracy. Being a Christian is not a state like my grey hair, or bad knees, or stigmatism in my left-eye. Being a Christian is what I am, only if being a Christian is what I do.

I have lots of questions about Christ's coming again. Will we notice? Has he already been, but we missed it? Will we crucify him yet again? Is he already here active in the world, but only among those who are not blinded by power, money, status, arrogance, and pride? Or is he awaiting the time to be ripe? Is Christ waiting for enough of us to be truly committed to him? Are we people who walk in darkness who cannot see a great light?

Clearly both Matthew and Isaiah are telling us that faith-filled, willing service as though Christ's arrival is imminent while avoiding self-indulgent thoughts like "there's plenty of time" "or nothing need be done until he comes" is what we must do.

Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Amen.