

SERMON NOTES

Sunday of Major Feasts¹
(Sixth Sunday of Advent)

Synaxis Gospel
Luke 19:12-28

GIFTED OPPORTUNITY

INTRODUCTION

Normally, we end our calendar year with this Gospel reading. It is the last teaching of Jesus for His disciples and followers shortly before He entered Jerusalem on the day we now call Palm Sunday, and where He knew the Cross awaited Him. His entry, riding the donkey foretold by the prophet Zechariah,² was Jesus' announcement that He was, indeed, the Savior-King promised by God in the Holy Scriptures.

However, Jesus did not want His disciples to misunderstand the meaning of that imminent public demonstration of His kingly status. Because many, and especially His closest disciples, were beginning to recognize that Jesus' miraculous deeds and gracious words fulfilled what was foretold of the future King, expectations were running high that He was about to bring in the Kingdom. As the great and just King, they expected that He would end all war, and "He will speak peace to the nations; and His dominion will be from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth."³

The last major city that Jesus visited on His journey to Jerusalem had been Jericho. There, he had been stopped by a blind man, who had addressed Him as "the Son of David," a recognized title for the promised King. The truth of that address was underscored when Jesus restored the man's sight—one of the verifying miracles that the King was expected to perform.

Then, one of the notorious tax-collectors—Jewish agents of the hated Roman oppressors—had shocked the people, when, in order to become a disciple of Jesus, he had renounced his wicked deeds, and restored four times as much as he had gouged from his helpless victims. In referring to this transformed "Son of Abraham," Jesus had used words almost identical to those written by the prophet Ezekiel.⁴ Moreover, He had once again referred to Himself as the "Son of Man," a title that immediately brought to mind not only the writings of Ezekiel, but also those of the prophet Daniel. (Daniel had seen a

¹ Because our yearly cycle of liturgical readings is repeated, each Sunday has its own assigned reading that does not vary from one year to the next. However, when there is a Sunday in the first week of January that falls before the 6th, the last Sunday of the previous December is called "The Sunday of Major Feasts."

² Zechariah 9:9

³ Zechariah 9:10

⁴ "For thus says the LORD God, 'Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out, I will seek the lost.' " – Ezekiel 34:11-16

vision of the divine figure, the Son of Man, receiving His kingdom from the One sitting on the throne of God.)

These allusions were meant to confirm the people's belief that He was indeed the King; however, their expectation of an imminent establishment of the Kingdom needed correction. Our reading was prefaced by Luke with these words, giving the reason for our Lord's parable:

*"And while they were listening to these things, He went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem and they **supposed** that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately."⁵*

SYNTAXIS READING

Luke 19:12-28

He said therefore, "A certain nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return.

"And he called ten of his slaves, and gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Do business with this until I come back.'

"But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'

"And it came about when he returned, after receiving the kingdom, he ordered that these slaves, to whom he had given the money, be called to him in order that he might know what business they had done.

"And the first appeared, saying, 'Master, your mina has made ten minas more.'

"And he said to him, 'Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, be in authority over ten cities.'

"And the second came, saying, 'Your mina has made five minas.'

"And he said to him also, 'And you are to be over five cities.'

⁵ Luke 19:11

“And another came, saying, ‘Master, behold your mina, which I kept put away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you, because you are an exacting man; you take up what you did not lay down, and reap what you did not so..’

“He said to him, ‘By your own words I will judge you, you worthless slave. Did you know that I am an exacting man, taking up what I did not lay down, and reaping what I did not sow?

“Then why did you not put the money in the bank, and having come, I would have collected it with interest?’

“And he said to the bystanders, ‘Take the mina away from him, and give it to the one who has the ten minas.’

“And they said to him, ‘Master, he has ten minas already.’

“I tell you, that to everyone who has shall more be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away.

“But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence.”

And after He had said these things, He was going on ahead, ascending to Jerusalem.

NOTES

He said therefore, “A certain nobleman went to a distant country to receive a kingdom for himself, and then return.

This introduction would have piqued the interest of Jesus’ listeners on two accounts. First, they were expecting Jesus to soon receive His own kingdom. Second, this introduction also had a familiar ring to it. Archelaus, equally hated son of the hated king, Herod the Great, had gone to Rome (‘a distant country’) to be appointed king of Judea according to his father’s will in BC 4.

In the Prophet Daniel’s vision, the divine figure, the Son of Man, received His Kingdom from the One sitting on the Throne of God in heaven.

That Jesus was of royal birth had just been proclaimed by the blind man of Jericho, and confirmed by the healing miracle—the promised divine King was to be from the royal line of King David.

In this parable, as in the history of Judah and Rome, the one seeking the crown must travel far away and then *return*. This required an extended time. In Daniel's vision, the Son of Man traveled to the very throne of God.

And he called ten of his slaves, and gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Do business with this until I come back.'

These ten belonged to the household of the nobleman. They were not just those he would rule over as King; they had a far more personal connection—they served him. The nobleman would need men of merit to help him rule his expected kingdom, and so, from his household, he chose these ten to test their abilities.

A 'mina' is a 'pound' of money. It was worth forty to fifty shekels of silver. A day's wages was one denarius and a silver shekel was worth 4 denarii.⁶ One mina, then, would have been worth at most 200 day's labor. This was not a huge amount, but it was not insignificant either. However, each slave equally received a mina with which to "Do business."

The nobleman did not specify how long the journey to the far country and back would take.

But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'

The people living in the land of the kingdom were not happy about the prospect of the nobleman becoming their king. As in the history with Archelaus, they sent a group to protest to the Emperor.

Jesus knew that the Jews as a nation did not want Him as their king and would protest to the Emperor's agent, resulting in His crucifixion. "We have no king but Caesar!" they would shout.

And it came about when he returned, after receiving the kingdom; he ordered that these slaves, to whom he had given the money, be called to him in order that he might know what business they had done.

The efforts of the citizens' delegation failed, for the nobleman returned as King. (The delegation opposing Archelaus also failed, although Archelaus received the kingdom with the title Ethnarch.)

In the case of the Jews listening, it was not the Roman Emperor, but God Himself, Who would install Jesus as King. Rome's crucifixion of Jesus did not prevent His becoming King and His future return.

Now, with full authority to rule, it was time to appoint those who would rule under him. The tested servants were called to give an accounting.

And the first appeared, saying, 'Master, your mina has made ten minas more.'

The first servant had invested well—we are not given the details—and had multiplied his one mina by ten.

And he said to him, 'Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, be in authority over ten cities.'

Pleased by the ability and faithfulness demonstrated by the slave with, relatively speaking, a very little thing, the King rewarded him with a much greater opportunity, the rule of ten cities of the kingdom.

⁶ This value was calculated from research on the internet.

And the second came, saying, ‘Your mina has made five minas.’

Likewise, the second slave had multiplied his one mina. He had not accomplished as much as the first slave, but he could present his master with an increase of five more minas.

And he said to him, ‘And you are to be over five cities.’

We do not hear the high praise the first slave received, but the second slave also was accorded ruling responsibilities commensurate with his accomplishment.

And another came, saying, ‘Master, behold your mina, which I kept put away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you, because you are an exacting man; you take up what you did not lay down, and reap what you did not sow.’

Jesus did not need to review the results of all the slaves. We have seen that they were rewarded according to the return of their one mina. However, one other example needed to be reviewed: that of the slave (or slaves) who had accomplished nothing.

The slave had carefully wrapped up his mina in a σουδάριον, a handkerchief normally used for wiping away sweat. Obviously, he had used neither for the master’s work while the nobleman was away.

The man gave as his excuse his perception of his master. This perception was one of an unjust, dishonest, and grasping master of whom the slave is afraid. “The general sense is, ‘You are a strict man, and I have taken care that you should get back the exact deposit, neither more nor less.’”⁷

He said to him, ‘By your own words I will judge you, you worthless slave. Did you know that I am an exacting man, taking up what I did not lay down, and reaping what I did not sow?’

The response of the King to this insult is not, as some have supposed, an admission that the servant’s perception is correct. Instead, the king simply judged the servant in accordance with the servant’s perception. “Since this is the type of man you thought me to be . . .”

This slave is worthless and his ‘reward’ will reflect this estimation.

Then why did you not put the money in the bank, and having come, I would have collected with interest?’

Usury among Israelites was against Jewish law. However, if the slave really considered his master such a dishonest, grasping type, he could have left the money in his *master’s* name with those who dealt in the usury trade. But he did not do this. The truth is: the slave knew the master would not have approved of such action and the slave’s characterization of the master was shown to be a lie. The slave was lazy and a worthless servant.

And he said to the bystanders, ‘Take the mina away from him, and give it to the one who has the ten minas.’

Instead of having the honor of administering a part of the kingdom, this slave was even stripped of the small responsibility he had been given. The slave who had excelled was further rewarded.

⁷ Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, The International Critical Commentary, fifth ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1964) p. 441-42

And they said to him, ‘Master, he has ten minas already.’

This command seemed unfair to the witnesses who were standing by. They probably thought the mina should go to one of the other slaves who did not have as much as the first slave.

“I tell you that to everyone who has shall more be given, but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away.

Here, we see the criteria for the reward system. The one who achieves will be given more opportunities to achieve. The one who does not achieve will be deprived of further opportunity.

But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence.’ ”

This statement seems severe to western ears accustomed to democracy, but it would have been accepted in the culture of Jesus’ day. The king is pictured as an absolute monarch, like the Roman emperor. An enemy was not permitted to live.

The king turned, from his evaluation and rewarding of his personal servants, to those not a part of his household, over whom he had been given dominion. The king would not tolerate enemies and those rejecting his rule. He commanded them to be summarily executed.

And after He had said these things, He was going on ahead, ascending to Jerusalem.

So ends Luke’s account of Jesus’ last journey to Jerusalem. The parable is not interpreted, but given the occasion and the people’s expectation “that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately,”⁸ it is obvious that Jesus told it to correct that expectation. His reception of the kingdom would require a long journey—He was going away for an extended period of time. However, in the meantime, the parable warns the disciples that they must be active for their Lord, or lose their reward when He returns. The waiting period is a time of probation in which the faithfulness of the followers of Jesus will be evaluated for future high positions in the coming Kingdom.

With the parable, Jesus further warns that those, who are His active enemies, will be condemned upon His return. Today we live in the age of grace, when opportunity is extended to all to accept God’s gracious offer of salvation. However, when He returns, it will be as Judge. Perhaps that is why our loving and compassionate God has delayed for so long that terrible Day of Judgment. For it is not His will that any should perish, but that all should come to know Him. Though they hate Him, His love for them was demonstrated on the Cross.

APPLICATION

The journey to Jerusalem was almost over as Jesus climbed up the ascent to the capital city where He knew the Jews would reject Him as their King, where He would endure the Cross. However, after His Resurrection, He would make that long journey to receive His Kingdom. In the meantime, He had given His disciples, and those crowds who followed Him, a parable of what they should expect upon His return.

It is a very serious lesson. Jesus’ journey to the Throne of God and back has lasted almost two thousand years. In the meantime, we are all being given an opportunity. The enemies of God are being given the opportunity to repent, and find forgiveness, from the One

⁸ Luke 19:11

Who loved them enough to endure the Cross for their sakes. Those who know God personally, His servants, are also given a very special opportunity. We are all given an *equal* opportunity to show our faithfulness and industry in His service. This opportunity does not hinge on our ethnic background, on our family's position, on our wealth, on our social standing, on our position of power or control in or outside the church. We are all on an equal footing.

When He returns, He will demand an accounting from each and every one of us. He will ask us what we have done with that special gift that we all have been given equally—the opportunity to serve Him with all our heart and soul. Some of us will excel, perhaps not in ways that draw the spotlight and applause of this world, but in ways that God sees and will commend, with, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Others may not achieve their full potential, and their reward will reflect that failure. That will be disappointing. Yet, the saddest case is that of those Christians who decide to take the gift and bury it, somewhere along with their worker's handkerchief, because they do not intend to exert themselves in the least for our Lord (and so will certainly not be wiping away any sweat). However, coasting, while our Lord is away, will cost those Christians dearly.⁹ At the judgment seat of Christ, all opportunity will be stripped from them and given to others who were willing to work faithfully. Moreover, these lazy Christians will be categorized as worthless. How tragic!

As we come to the end of this year, it is customary to take stock of ourselves, reviewing our past, and resolving to do better in the next year. From the Catholicos to the poorest parishioner, we have all been given an equal gift, the opportunity to serve our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. The circumstances surrounding the exercise of that gift will be different, but the gift is the same—the opportunity to serve faithfully and unreservedly.

Let us ask ourselves, “Have we sought to serve our God with all our heart? Have we done the work He has placed before us? If we are spiritual teachers, have we taught His Word truthfully with diligence and faithfulness? If teaching is not our calling, have we drawn others to Christ because we have helped where we could help, have been supporting, compassionate, encouraging, loving, and forgiving?” Have we multiplied our gift in the hearts of others?

It has been almost two thousand years since our Lord ascended to receive His Kingdom. Though the time has been long, He *will* return. What kind of servant will He find us to be? From this moment on, let us determine to be one to whom He will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

⁹ In the spiritual realm, as well as in the physical realm, the ancient proverb holds true: “How long will you lie down O Sluggard? When will you arise from sleep? ‘A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest (lie down)’—and your poverty will come in like a vagabond, and your need like an armed man.”—Proverbs 6:11