

## SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

# Then, Now, and Then

Third Sunday After Epiphany

January 22, 2012

The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar

St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

Romans 7:29-31

**I** mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, <sup>30</sup> and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, <sup>31</sup> and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

We're in the season of Epiphany, which means "manifestation". It's the time when we focus on God revealing himself and his purposes for the human race to the human race in Jesus. Chuck described the greatness of this revelation just last Thursday in his daily devotion. He said, **"It is an act of love for God to reveal the Truth to those who are otherwise incapable of discerning and knowing the Truth. God accomplished this revelation through his only Son, Jesus Christ and since we neither requested nor deserved that revelation it was an act of grace and mercy."** Jesus starts revealing himself in our reading from Mark's gospel by calling the first disciples, Peter and Andrew and James and John. Up to this point, Jesus has been living everyday life in Nazareth, but now he begins to unveil what God has in mind. Without hesitation, these first four leave their jobs and their family and strike out with him for they know not where.

But these seven verses are only the beginning. If we fast forward, we read about Jesus' terrible ordeal in Gethsemane and on the cross. We read about his death and burial. In the last chapter of Mark we read about the astonishment of the women who come to the tomb three days after his burial and find him gone. The angel tells them, **"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that**

**he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” (Mark 16:1-7)**

And between calling his first four disciples and dying and rising from the dead, Jesus tells all twelve exactly what will happen when he comes back the second time, after his death and resurrection: **“But be alert; I have already told you everything. <sup>24</sup>“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, <sup>25</sup> and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. <sup>26</sup> Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. <sup>27</sup> Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. . . . <sup>31</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. <sup>32</sup> But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Mark 13:23-27, 31-32)**

From where we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we tend to look back on Jesus in the past tense. He lived and died 2,000 years ago, back **then**. We need to remember that the Jesus who manifested himself as the Son of God in a specific lifespan to a specific and limited circle of people clearly explained to them that there will come a time when he will be manifested a second time for every human being to see. Jesus was manifested **then** as the Son of God who was to come for our salvation. He confirmed who he was and opened the way for our salvation through his death and resurrection—**then**. From **then**, he has reached into the future and manifested himself to us **now** through faith. But he will come again **then**—in the end, when he comes again in glory to judge all humanity and to transform the universe to the perfection for which it was created. So we have **then—now—and then**.

Just as he did **then**, Jesus calls us **now** to **“repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15)** The good news is the gospel, the announcement of the new ruler of humanity who gives his life for the sins of those who believe in him and gives them life in eternity with himself. He calls us to holy living **now** because of what he did **then**. But what he did back **then** was to introduce the other **then**—**“Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory.”** Jesus’ resurrection manifests him as who he is, the Lord of life and Lord of all time, eternity and the universe. It is because Jesus is the Lord of everything that he will return to finish and perfect what he began back **then**.

We live **now**, between **then** and **then**. In our reading from Romans, Paul tells us how we should live. He prefaces it all by warning us that **“the**

**appointed time has grown short;**” that is, the time before the second **then**, when Jesus will return for us. If Paul thought it had grown short in his day, certainly it’s much shorter for us. It could be any day. It could be today.

When you first read it, it’s a strange passage, full of contradictions: married people should live as though they aren’t married, those who mourn as though they’re not mourning, people who rejoice as though they’re not, those who buy things as though they haven’t, and those who deal with the world as though they have no dealings with it. The point is that we are believers both in what Jesus the Son of God accomplished back **then**, and what he has in store for us at his second coming, the next **then**.. The **now**--“**The present form of this world-- is passing away.**”

The point is that we can’t be engrossed in the **now** of everyday life as though it was the most important thing. What is the most important thing? Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15: “**For I handed on to you as of *first importance* what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, <sup>4</sup> and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.**” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4) Then in verses 24-26, “***Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.*** <sup>25</sup> **For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.** <sup>26</sup> **The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”** (1 Corinthians 15:24-26)

Christ’s lordship over death and life and history and eternity is the central reality for all of human life. Paul is saying that instead of trying to make the gospel relevant to our lives, we should make our lives relevant to the gospel. Those who are married shouldn’t live just to please their spouses and families, but to please the Lord. God created the family. It’s his basic unit of ministry, not an end in itself.

Mourning isn’t wrong, it’s natural. But we must do our mourning knowing deep down that it’s not final. Jesus has conquered death forever, and he will absolutely redeem and restore everything and everyone whom we have lost—no matter what or whom. Rejoicing isn’t wrong either, but we should realize that joy and fun in this life is only a pale shadow of the sheer ecstasy of fulfillment that will drench our beings when Christ comes back, and that we still have lots of work to do in this life to spread his gospel of joy. There’s nothing wrong with buying things, whether investments or necessities or toys. But we buy them realizing that God owns them and everything we have because everything there is belongs to him. He has entrusted what we have to us so we can use it for his purposes. And finally, we have to deal with the world. We have to go out and prepare ourselves

and our children to make a living for ourselves and our family, but we can never become so engrossed in advancing our career and our income that we lose sight that God has given us our career and our income to use for his purposes, not our own. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 7:23, just before our reading, **“You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters.”** We don’t own ourselves. We can’t become so engrossed in everyday life now that we forget that we live in this world for God, between **then** and **then**.

But keeping this perspective has always been hard for Christians. Barbara and I have a friend who teaches American Church History. She wrote her Ph.D. dissertation about the shift that came about in American revival-oriented evangelical denominations in the 1800’s. The movement began among poor, rural populations that were more or less out of the mainstream. It spread like wildfire, but slowly, as these folks became more numerous, they became more prosperous. The fire sort of went out. They became more focused on denominational details and building imposing churches and calling clergy with impressive credentials than on the gospel. They lost sight of **then** and **then** and became engrossed in the **now**. They began to see everyday life as an end in itself.

It’s easy to do. Let us remember that we live **now** between **then**, when Jesus died for us and rose again, and **then**, when he will come for us again. St. Matthew’s has undertaken our mission initiative just so our congregation can keep focused on what Christ has done and will do. That’s why Chuck is in Ethiopia teaching basic carpentry skills to people to help them economically and preaching Jesus to people who have no Christian influence, so that when he comes again, they can rejoice in his salvation along with us.

That is the most important thing.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

*--Book of Common Prayer, p. 219*