

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - C

I don't know anyone who has quit their job in order to wait for the second coming of Christ.

That's basically what was going on when St. Paul felt the need to write his second letter to the Thessalonians.

Some Christians were thinking that the Lord's return was just around the corner and they thought they should focus all their attention on being ready for his arrival.

Needless to say, they had become a burden on the rest of the community, which had to provide for their daily needs.

Today, the only evidence of that sort of thinking comes with the occasional rise of a cult of one sort or another, which cuts off all ties to the surrounding world in order to follow its leader's misguided instructions.

Most of us know better than to take such a route. For one thing, unless you're independently wealthy, that approach leads quickly to destitution.

What today's readings confront us with, though, is the question of whether we've moved too far in the other direction.

Of course, we have not quit our jobs in order to wait for Christ's return, but the question is, "Are we still waiting for his return at all?"

Clearly, we have lost the feeling that his return is "just around the corner" which

was a widespread belief among the first century Christians.

And what can take its place is a sense that, while we believe theoretically that Jesus will come again, practically we expect that we will meet our maker at the moment of our individual death rather than that we will be around to see the end of the world.

When that happens, some consequences follow that we don't specifically intend, but which are there all the same.

One major consequence is that life beyond us individually becomes of secondary importance.

We may worry about what sort of world we are creating today, or leaving the next generation, or we may not.

At some point we can simply forget about those who suffer now or our concern for future generations can morph into the attitude that "they are just going to have to figure it out for themselves."

As Christians, what ought to be our stance toward the second coming of the Lord?

The best illustration of that that I've come by is a story about one of the expeditions to the South Pole. Before getting far enough south to move from ship to dogsled, the ship became stuck in the ice.

The expedition was on the verge of failure and a resulting loss of life.

So, the leader of the expedition—I can't remember if it was Admiral Byrd or Admiral Perry—decided that the only chance for survival was if he and a few

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chosen men would return to their base and get help for freeing the ship.

The journey back was arduous and they just barely made it. Once they had resupplied, they were filled with anxiety about what they would find when they finally reached their crew ship still frozen in the ice.

When they did arrive they were surprised to find everyone still alive and in relatively good shape, given the harsh conditions they had been facing.

The admiral asked the crew how they had managed so well, and to a man they replied: "It was the first mate, sir. Every morning he would wake us with the command, 'Look lively, men, this could be the day when the admiral returns.'"

Conducting themselves with a lively expectation that it would be "any day now" kept the crew focused and busy about the tasks of survival.

I think that's basically how we are to go about things, too. A lively expectation of the Lord's return can do quite a lot to keep us in good shape, spiritually. It wards off a lackadaisical attitude or the temptation to give up.

It keeps us focused on the tasks at hand and preserves a proper perspective in the face of adverse conditions around us.

And the tasks at hand can be summed up in no better way than Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

Here's how we prepare for the return of the Lord and the definitive in-breaking of the kingdom of God. By:

- Maintaining a poverty of spirit, recognizing the importance of humbly receiving God's mercy and love.
- Showing mercy
- Being meek
- Hungering and thirsting for righteousness, our own but also that of our society.
- Being a peacemaker
- Enduring persecution for the sake of Christ

These are all avenues open to the kingdom of God and can exist even in the here and now.

These are the order of the day for us who want to be prepared for the day of the Lord—whether it comes to us one at a time or all of us altogether.