

Mark
Year B

**EATING WITH THE
BRIDEGROOM**

The Spiritual Wisdom
of the Gospels for
Christian Preachers
and Teachers



JOHN SHEA

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of the Gospels for
Christian Preachers
and Teachers**

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Working and Watching

A Spiritual Commentary

[Jesus said to his disciples:] “In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. 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.

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

This cosmic imagery expresses and conveys the impact and importance of the revelation of Jesus. When a way of thinking, feeling, and acting has held sway for a long period of time, it can be imagined as heaven and earth, an unshakeable cosmic backdrop. Human affairs may be tumultuous; history may be on the loose. But the implacable

sky and the solid earth stand firm. They are the stable stage, the orderly succession of time and seasons. "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever" (Eccl 1:4).

However, when a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting arrives and threatens the established order of things, the best way to express it is cosmic collapse. The sun and moon are snuffed out; stars fall. Angels search heaven and earth, collecting the ones who will survive into the new world. The old arrangements are over. Heaven and earth are passing away, and it is the words of Jesus, words that are creating an alternative way to be human, that is bringing them down. These words are the new reality, and they will not pass away.

This radical transition has a cost. Many will go down with the world they promoted and within which they prospered. But from the point of view of those who followed Jesus, this destruction is favorable. It makes way for the advent of summer, not the full-blown summer of high heat, but the first bud, difficult to detect but bursting with promise. The new way is in its infancy. Its understandings are piecemeal and progressive. Its actions are experimental and tentative. Therefore, it is necessary to both work and watch, to be both a servant ("each with his or her own work") and a doorkeeper ("on the watch").

In this context working is really co-working. The Lord is active and at work in the world bringing about a new humanity. God lures people into the same activity, making them servants of divine activity. But in order for them to join the Lord's activity, they must be awake to what God is doing. They must notice the Spirit's arrival, the sudden presence and voice whose time cannot be predicted. The old ways, the ways of the heaven and earth that are passing away, are always predictable. There is no need to be awake to follow them. They are ingrained habits, mindless and oppressive business as usual. The Word of God that was embodied in Jesus is novel in each situation. Only those who both work and watch can hear this Word.

This injunction to work and watch, especially to watch, is strident. The text shouts it; the repeated imperatives assault the ear. And the final line, "What I say to you, I say to all," suggests a universal application. Therefore, this advice is not a temporary strategy. Hang in there for awhile, and then you will be able to get some sleep. It is an adaptive challenge, a permanent way of being in the world. Can Christians live engaged in God's work and ever open to the arrival of the new? This strange combination, immersed in the present and on the edge of the future, is the way of discipleship.

Teaching

When I was thirteen years old, I was introduced to meditation. The seminary high school I attended required all students to purchase a copy of *Meditation Mechanics*. As well as I can remember, this book had an introduction on the dynamics of attention and distraction. The body of the book was a series of Gospel texts with instructions on how to slowly ponder them and benefit from their inspiration. My spiritual director told me the best place to meditate was in church before morning Mass.

So there I was at 6:30 in the morning in a back pew of a large, Gothic, urban church. However, I was not alone. Even at this early hour, the church was flooded with regulars. Pious men and women were clanging coins down the steel chutes of the votive stand and lighting candles with brightening hopes. Widows, dressed in black, were whispering to one another about who was ill and where to go for breakfast. An occasional girl, my own age, would wander down the main aisle. Christian courtesy demanded my eyes see her safely to her seat. There was a lot going on. Meditation was not one of them.

I told my spiritual director that the early morning church was too noisy. He said, "Go at night when there is no one there." So there I was at 7:30 at night, kneeling in the pew with my meditation book, more often than not a basketball on the bench behind me. Only a few other people were in the church. No outer distractions.

On my first night, just as I had begun to meditate, a voice said, "Kneel up straight." It was the voice of my grandmother. She wasn't in the church; she was in my head. And she was not alone. The whole neighborhood had taken up residency between my ears. The lack of noise on the outside made me aware of the considerable noise inside. Meditation was in jeopardy from both outer and inner distractions.

Over the years and with practice, I have learned how to steady my mind, to gently resist every distraction that wants to steal my attention—except the really good distractions. Sustaining attention is a great learning. This human possibility is symbolized by the Latin spiritual advice, *Age quod agis* (Do what you are doing.) However, it has also made me something of a Neanderthal. I cannot watch television and read at the same time, or seriously listen and talk to a friend with the radio on. I walk without earphones and when I eat alone, I often eat in silence—only eating. In this way I learned some of the tricks that hover around the dynamic of distraction and attention.

This was part of my early adventures following the injunction, “Watch!” But there was more to come. When spiritual traditions praise attention and say it is the key to spiritual development, they mean more than the ability to stay focused for a period of time on one particular task. They propose a deeper watching, an inner vigilance that notices not only the comings and goings of the outer world but the rising and perishing of inner thoughts and emotions. In the first moment this sustained watching is a witness, acknowledging but not investing in the contents of consciousness. The depth of the person is always on reserve, waiting, watching, staying awake.

Paradoxically, this deep watching does not preclude activity. It coexists with work, with doing what has to be done. What the watching brings to the working is an added dimension. Some have called this dual consciousness, and Meister Eckhart has imagined it as a hinge and a door. (See Robert K. C. Forman, *Meister Eckhart: The Mystic as Theologian: An Experiment in Methodology* [Rockport, Mass.: Element, 1991] 134.) The door swings back and forth engaging what is happening, but the hinge stays steady, anchoring the door and allowing it to move freely. The unmoved watcher and moving worker live side by side. The Christian tradition has called it recollection in action. We remember our ultimate identity as we engage our proximate tasks. So the watcher and worker combine to actualize the full human potential.

However, there comes a time when the watcher and worker join forces. This is the second moment, the true fulfillment of the life of the watcher. When consciousness cultivates the watcher, it waits beyond the mind, and peers through the screen of conventional and customary thoughts. When it does, it begins to discern a component of every arising and perishing situation that is often missed. In every experience there is a lure to redemption, to maximizing value, to making something the best it can be. When “watcher consciousness” sees this lure, it pours everything it has into the work of responding to and engaging this possibility. In symbolic code, the Lord has arrived and the watcher and worker unite to greet him.

This is a difficult possibility to envision. Here is one person who witnesses to how it works: Eckhart Tolle, a contemporary spiritual teacher, is talking about a “dimension of consciousness that is unconditioned.” When consciousness rests in this dimension, “You’d be surprised at the alertness that is there when you allow what is. It is the alertness out of which action arises, should it be necessary.” Andrea Kulin, who has interviewed Tolle, supplies a piece of her own experi-

ence, a time when action was necessary. "I've had the experience, while teaching, of sitting with a distressed child and being uncertain how to help. Sometimes, rather than going into my own reaction of distress, I was able to be there quietly, openly, just 'taking in' the child, and from somewhere, something came that was the right thing, the thing the child needed. I don't know where that came from but it felt like a different form of intelligence."

In Andrea Kulin the watcher and worker joined to greet the arrival of the Lord, "the right thing, the thing the child needed."

Of course, this is the surprise that the injunctions "beware, be alert, be on the watch, stay awake" hold. The Lord is arriving in every moment, and when the watchers see him, they become workers in the kingdom.