

Looking Forward

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

5 January, 2025

Children's Talk: Knowing the Future

Wouldn't it be great to know the future? What are some of the things you want to be able to predict? I can think of a few: who will win the rugby game; what the numbers on the lottery will be; what gifts you will get for your birthday; what questions will be on the test; and so on. We like to know the future because it takes away stress and anxiety. Uncertainty about the future makes us afraid. If we don't know for sure what is going to happen or when, then it is possible that something bad will happen at the wrong time.

Now there is one person who does know the future perfectly, and that's the Lord. So if the Lord knows the future, why doesn't he tell us what it is? Well not knowing the future is actually good for us. The Lord explains how in a parable about servants:

Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. (Luke 12:35-40)

The point of this parable is that because the servants have no idea when their master is coming back, they are constantly ready for him to come back. If they knew exactly when he was getting home then they would be lazy and not do any work and until just before he arrived. It's like kids waiting for their dad to get home: if they know exactly when, they might go into his room that they are not supposed to play in. But if he could come home at any time, they will stay out of his room for fear that he will come home when they are still in there.

What that means for us is that the Lord doesn't tell us the future because if we knew the future we would misbehave. If you knew you were going to get away with a lie, there would be nothing stopping you from lying; if you knew you would only get caught stealing at certain times, you would do it at other times; if you knew everyone would laugh with you when you made fun of someone when they weren't around, you would be more tempted to do it. But because we do not know the future, we are more likely to always be on our best behaviour. We cannot predict when we will get away with bad behaviour and when good behaviour will really matter. So rather than trying to predict what will happen, the Lord wants us to focus on doing what is right in the present moment, no matter what. That way we will always be ready, whether the future is good or bad.

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Opening: Look to the Future

The beginning of a new year is often a time when we turn our attention to the future. The coming year holds great hope, but also uncertainty and challenges. The future is a challenge because of all the unknowns: there is much that we can't control, and even the things we do control can go horribly wrong. And although we may trust the Lord, there is no way of knowing exactly how He will be guiding us. We cannot predict or pre-empt Divine Providence.

That being the reality, there are two false ideas we might fall into: on the one hand, we might try to take complete control of our futures so that we can be sure of success; or we might put everything so completely into God's hands that we decide to sit back and simply wait for Him to fix everything. But neither of those approaches can succeed. We have to prepare and walk our future journeys as if we were in charge, and yet at the exact same time realize that really it is the Lord leading us, and His guidance will take us on twists and turns that we never planned to happen. In short, the Lord asks us to plan for a future that He already knows is going to be quite different from whatever plans we come up with. That is a tough pill to swallow.

Part 1: Prioritize Spiritual Growth

First of all, when we look to and plan for the future, our priority should be on spiritual things. In other words, we should focus more on "what kind of person do I want to be?" than on "what sorts of things do I want to have or do?" The Lord told a parable that illustrates what can happen when we get this prioritization backwards:

Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do,

since I have no room to store my crops?' So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'" But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:16-21)

The rich man's focus was on his worldly goods. Even when he had more than enough, he still focused on how he could accumulate more on into the future.

Meanwhile he assumed that his soul or spirit was taken care of. Yet that very night he passed away, leaving all of his worldly possessions behind and taking only his soul with him.

So it goes with many of our plans: we naively believe that we have everything sorted out, that there will be no complications, and that we have accounted for every possibility. And then something happens, or goes wrong as it were, and it throws all the plans out of whack. Not always of course; but often we receive the unpleasant reminder that we are far less in control than we like to think. With all that can go wrong with our plans, it becomes important that we not place the wellbeing of our souls in worldly planning: what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul? When we focus on the kind of people we want to become then it will not matter what happens to the other things we have planned, and whether they work out or do not. When you get your way, will you be proud and arrogant or humble? When you do not get your way, will you wallow in self-pity or will you be gracious? You cannot entirely choose what will happen, but you can choose how you will react, as long as you are prepared. For the man who put all his happiness in worldly wealth, he had nothing to fall back on when it was snatched away in an instant. If he had rather put his happiness in building the character of his soul, he would have amassed a treasure that could never be taken away. As Jesus says,

Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:20-21)

When we plan for the future the most important part of the planning is on who we will become regardless of what happens.

Part 2: Remember God's Providence

Knowing that the important thing is to control our own behaviour does not take away the anxiety we face when we look forward to uncertainty and possible failure.

The Lord addresses this anxiety with the familiar refrain:

Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds? And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? If you then are not able to do the least, why are you anxious for the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will He clothe you, O you of little faith? (Luke 12:24-28)

The Lord's Divine Providence is looking after even the birds and the flowers; of course He is looking after you with even more care! The sentiment here presented is comforting but also confusing: if the Lord is looking after us with such deep devotion, then why is it that such terrible things can and will happen? Should we really pretend that harm will not come or that the future will be perfect because of God's guidance?

I would say that that does not resonate with our experience of life. If we take the attitude that the Lord will make everything work out the way we want then we may end up deeply disappointed, resentful, and angry, because that is not how life works. If, on the other hand, no matter what happens, no matter how bad it gets, we trust the Lord is leading us through it to some better end then we will be better prepared to face those things.

Take someone who worries deeply about the future and is constantly picturing how things could go wrong. She might read this passage and then try to convince herself the Lord will not let anything go wrong. When inevitably they do she will be even worse off, because she convinced herself that the Lord would not let that occur. The alternative is to accept that things could go wrong, but that even if they do the Lord is still in charge and He will lead her through them. This attitude would allow her to realistically consider her future possibilities without being overwhelmed. If God is taken care of the birds and flowers, then of course He is still taking care of you when you lose your job, fight with family, and fail at a dream, and so on. The teachings for the New Church say that those who trust the Lord,

...know that for those who trust in the Divine all things are moving towards an everlasting state of happiness, and that no matter what happens at any time to them, it contributes to that state. (*Secrets of Heaven* §8478)

God's providence is everywhere all the time. Just because you cannot see it right now does not mean it is not there. So don't pretend bad things won't happen; but when they do, remember that the Lord will bring some good out of it.

Part 3: Don't Sit Idle

Since God is always leading us to some good, no matter what, that kind of absolves us of responsibility, right? We can even find some validation of this false notion in our own pasts: when I look back I can see how the Lord used my past mistakes to help me grow, so why not just keep making stupid mistakes and trust the Lord will force a course correction? That doesn't really work. It is true we do not know the future the Lord has in store for us, and it is true that many of our plans go awry; but if we sit back and do nothing, there is nothing for the Lord to work with or to

bring good out of. We actually have to be working towards something. Don't wait for God to intervene, act now. Spiritual procrastination is not good for you.

Jesus compares this to servants waiting for their master to come home from a wedding feast. He says,

Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately. Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching.

Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants. (Luke 12:35-38)

Jesus encourages us to be like servants who are prepared, so that no matter what time the master comes home, they will be ready to receive him. We are like those ignorant servants when it comes to Divine Providence: we do not know when or how the Lord will guide us. We cannot see the future. We cannot predict what will work and what will not. But if because of that we decide to sit back and wait we are like bad servants, and when the master comes at an unexpected time nothing will be ready. On the other hand, if we constantly prepare, it doesn't matter what when the Lord steps in: it will always be a good time.

So how do we stay prepared for the Lord, so that He has something to work with and direct in our lives? We prepare by using our prudence and our best understanding of what is right to live well in the moment. To do that we have to resist the temptation to procrastinate spiritually: the temptation to wait for God to give you a sign, to say I'll work on that issue in due time, or worst of all to say I'll keep on repeating my mistakes since God seems to keep bringing good out of them. This approach would reduce us to lifeless statues, waiting helplessly to be transformed:

...if a person did not manage all the concerns of his function and life as though by his own prudence, he could not be led and directed by Divine providence. For he would be like someone standing with hands hanging limp,

mouth open, and eyes closed, holding his breath and awaiting influx. (*Divine Providence* §210)

We don't know the future. We cannot control the future. But in the present moment we can act to the best of our abilities, knowing the Lord will guide us. One way that I have heard this expressed is that we need to implement our plan A, so that God can implement His plan B. This happens a lot with jobs: you have plans to go into one line of work, but through various events you have ended up doing something completely different from your original plan, but it's exactly where you are meant to be. So while you have not ended up doing what you planned, you never would have ended up there if you hadn't been following a plan in the first place.

Conclusion: Do Your Best

Ultimately, we do not know where the Lord is going to lead us next. But that does not mean we should either try to force His hand or procrastinate. What we can do however is to prioritize who we want to become, not what we want to do or have; trust that even when things do go wrong, the Lord is still in charge; and act in the present moment to the best of our abilities so that the Lord can redirect our efforts to an even better future. If we do all these three things then we can be certain the Lord will give us a better future, and that is the only future certainty we need. As the Lord says,

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Jehovah, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)