

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 12, 2023

Our Church's liturgical year ends with texts about the coming of the Son of Man, which leads into the New Year with Cycle B and the Season of Advent (December 3)— the Season of "Coming." Jesus' future coming as the conquering Son of Man at the end of time, and his past coming as the helpless infant in a manger are the topics of our remembrance.

This weekend's readings bring the usual warnings about preparation for the end of our own world, the end of our own time, and our passage to another world. They tell us that a searching, watching, and growing heart is essential for a lively, dynamic faith in God. They ask us whether we are ready for these events and how we are preparing for them.

Today's parable that Jesus tells us is partially an allegory, based on Palestinian matrimonial customs. It teaches us to be prepared at all times for the Lord's return. The narrative is something which would be very familiar to his Palestinian readers – a village marriage

Apparently ten girls would be asked to accompany the bride as she awaited the arrival of the bridegroom. The problem was that they had no idea when the bridegroom would turn up and, when it got dark, they would need to have lighted lamps. If the bride's companions were caught unawares, if they were not around when the bridegroom came, they could be locked out or left behind.

In April 1988 the evening news reported the sad story of a photographer who was also a skydiver. He had jumped from a plane along with several other skydivers and filmed the group as they individually dove out of the plane and opened their parachutes. As the video was being shown of each member of the crew jumping out and then pulling their rip cord so that their parachute opened to the wind, the final skydiver opened his parachute and then the picture went out of control.

The announcer reported that the cameraman had fallen to his death, having jumped out of the plane without a parachute. It was not until he reached for the ripcord that he realized that he was in free fall, taking pictures without a parachute.

Tragically he was unprepared for the jump. It did not matter how many times he had done it before or what skill he had. By forgetting the parachute, he made a foolish and deadly mistake. Nothing could save him, because his Faith was in a parachute which he had never taken the trouble to buckle on. It is a story not unlike the parable which Jesus tells about the foolish bridesmaids forgetting to bring something very important and necessary to fulfill their responsibilities to the bridal couple.

Our Gospel parable seems to be so rooted in the culture of the time that we might not know for sure exactly how it would have been received by those disciples who heard Jesus tell it. In this case, Jesus knowing his audience felt that a lot of explanation was not necessary, and so he sums it up in just a few words.

“Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

My dear friends, we don't have to be experts on ancient Israel to notice that this story seems to be about expectations, and preparation, and vigilance. The “foolish” virgins in the story really messed up for reasons we might not fully understand and in doing so, missed both the bridegroom and the wedding feast. By seeing the bridegroom as Jesus and the party as “heaven” or “communion with God” or the “new life” won for us by Christ, the story comes more clearly into focus.

What's not always clear is what it means to be prepared, what it means to be ready, what it means to be “awake”. How exactly do we make sure we are ready to meet Jesus and accompany him into the wedding feast that never ends? What do we need to do? And more importantly, what do I need to bring? I want to experience this celebration, and as with all parties, I certainly don't want to show up “empty-handed”.

My dear friends, the irony of this particular situation is that this is one of those instances in which something spiritual sort of “works” the opposite way it does in our

day-to-day lives. In this case, the best way to prepare for the party, the way we can be most ready, IS to show up empty-handed, IS to come to the party with no attachments, IS to empty ourselves of everything that is getting in the way or holding us back.

The truth is, the things of this world will not be required to “get us in”, they will not help us on this journey. In fact, they almost certainly will hinder us. And these things we are clinging to and refusing to let go of are different for each of us, and so there isn’t one answer that applies to everyone. One person’s attachment might not mean much to someone else and vice-versa. And so, we need to look deeply and honestly as to what these weights, these burdens, these useless attachments might be.

But there is something we do need to have filled, something that shouldn’t be empty, something God expects, wants, longs for. In a sense, this is the “oil” the foolish virgins forgot or neglected to prioritize. And this “thing” that needs to be full is each of our hearts. We can’t “get in” we can’t experience the celebration that begins in this life and continues into eternity if we decide to show up empty-HEARTED.

Jesus, the bridegroom wants our hearts filled with every good thing. Hearts full of kindness and mercy and understanding. Hearts full of love and compassion and forgiveness. Hearts open to grace, hearts longing to be filled with our living God (the bridegroom) who wants nothing more than to dwell within us for all eternity.

And so, our hands need to be empty and our hearts need to be full. Imagine that. Only then will we be properly prepared to accompany Jesus to the wedding feast beyond all wedding feasts, the celebration for which we were created, and for which Jesus died to make possible.

Folks, we’ve been invited. And this is one party we should never say “no” to. So let’s do the obvious and the faithful thing, to say “yes” - say “amen” - and then do whatever we can to make our loving host happy, helping make the celebration the party God so deeply desires.