

Our liturgical season resembles what's going on in nature with the falling leaves - the end of the church year is coming. These last three Sundays before Advent focus on the end times.

Our Old Testament reading for today is not in the Protestant Bible. It's from the book of Wisdom or the Wisdom of Solomon. The passage describes someone who is vigilant and awake at night in pursuing the truth - like monks getting up in the middle of the night in order to read the Psalms and to pray, to contemplate, to meditate - to search for wisdom. Whoever is seeking wisdom gets up in the middle of the night or gets up very early. They will be prepared for the end times.

Today, we get a special parable - found only in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is describing the first century Jewish equivalent of today's bridesmaids. He tells about ten single ladies waiting for a wedding procession in the middle of the night, and the foolishness of some and the wisdom of others. It was a 5 to 5 tie - even after the recount. Some aspects of the story seem strange to most of us today, but not to Jesus' audience.

As anyone in first century Israel would know, marriage begins with the betrothal - an exchange of vows. The couple legally become husband and wife, but they don't begin to live together until the husband prepares a home for the wife. Then the celebration of the week-long wedding feast with the townspeople and the family can begin.

Wedding customs in ancient Israel required a lot of preparation. On one night of the feast, the groom would show up at a gathering of the bride and her bridesmaids, and then the bride and groom would be carried in procession to their new home, into the wedding chamber. They might take the longest route possible through town so that villagers along the way could join in the procession. The bridesmaids bearing oil lamps or torches would guide the crowd through the dark streets.

To try to lead this big procession without the right stuff is like trying to get into a special event today that requires a prearranged permit or reservation. You just don't get in without showing the proper bar code on your phone.

So this is not an ordinary wedding and this story is not really about oil and lamps. There is spiritual significance to this.

Matthew's Gospel frequently compares the kingdom of Heaven to a royal wedding or a wedding feast, and that's the imagery here. This parable is really about the final judgment - the second coming of Jesus at the end of time.

Imagine Jesus as the divine bridegroom, who appears to be delayed, but will come at some point. And we don't know when he's going to arrive, so we need to be ready. The bridesmaids, the ten single ladies in this case, can represent the Church in two different states: those who are prepared for the second coming, like the five wise bridesmaids who had extra oil for their lamps, or those unprepared for the second coming, like the five foolish bridesmaids. Those who are prepared for the second coming are going to be brought into the great wedding feast of the Lamb, as the Book of Revelation describes the kingdom of heaven. Those unprepared will suffer eternal separation from God, what we call the punishment of hell.

Almost every parable of Jesus has some kind of a "twist" or an odd part of the story that just doesn't make sense. The first twist is that the five wise bridesmaids refuse to give their friends any oil. They tell them to go and buy some for themselves. The second twist is that no groom would shut the door in the faces of friends of his bride. No groom is going to treat the bridesmaids like this. Not only does the groom refuse to let them in, he says: "I do not know you." It's not like he couldn't recognize them. The bridesmaids are all friends or family. That harsh statement sounds more like he has cut off his former ties with them.

That's how we know that Jesus is talking about the final

judgment. He warns us that there are consequences for being unprepared. Some things, you just can't get at the last moment.

What does the oil symbolize? St. Augustine answered this way back in the 4th Century. In the Sermon on the Mount and in this parable, the lighted lamp is a symbol for good works, your good deeds, things you do to live your life in accordance with God's will. That's why you can't give some of yours to another person.

Jesus keeps driving the point home, time after time, that yes, faith is important; yes, believing in Jesus is essential; yes, having a relationship with him is essential; but we express our faith with the fruits of that relationship - through what Jesus calls "good works."

On our Christian journey, discipleship must endure the test of time and many periods of darkness. Especially in this crazy year of the virus and the election, any disciple's enthusiasm can run out. But every disciple is offered the grace and the opportunities to continue in good works - to continue to acquire the oil that he or she will need when the Lord returns. The wisdom to live our life in accordance with God's will is given to us in these scriptures, and in the food prepared for us at this Eucharistic table.

So you need to not only have a lamp, but you need to have enough oil to keep that lamp lighted with your good works, so that your light might shine before all.

So, in the long run, a bucket list of places to go or events to witness are not as important as saving up the oil that we will need when the Lord returns.

Amen?

- Deacon Jack Schaefer