

Commentary for the 32 Sunday in Ordinary Time



A Gallup poll revealed that 78% of Americans anticipate going to Heaven. Yet, many of them admit they never pray nor study the Scriptures nor go to church. They confess they only think of themselves. Why would God want them in His Heaven? If we don't like being a patsy, why should God be one? His Kingdom, says the monk, is a prepared place for a prepared people.

Responsibility is a strength we must have. Our conduct today determines our future tomorrow with Christ. "It is not easy to be a Christian," advises a writer, "but it is easy to take the first step."

A wedding in Palestine was an excuse for a super party. The people deserved it. Their lives were ones of toil from sunrise to sunset. The saying "Thank God It's Friday!" would mean nothing to them.

The bride and groom did not go away to Bermuda for a honeymoon. Rather, they stayed home and hosted the mother of all wedding receptions for seven days. It would be a joyful interlude in their difficult lives. The overworked townspeople felt there could not be too many weddings. All, even workaholics, love a few laughs and a chance to party.

Now the disappointment of the five bridesmaids without oil can be understood. The bridegroom had arrived unexpectedly. They went searching for oil. The doors were locked. They were shut out from the wedding. Their wedding finery, bought on the lay-a-way plan at Wal Mart, was a waste. Also they would not be able to party hearty for a week. They were inconsolable.

Some charge the five foolish bridesmaids were treated harshly. But they were not kids. They knew the rules. "If you can't afford the time," advise ex-cons, "don't commit the crime." The parable reflects Palestinian customs. Incidentally, the people of the East would not be enchanted by our wedding customs. A trendy New York magazine pictured an abundantly pregnant bride in a white maternity wedding gown on its glossy cover. I was at a wedding reception where the elegantly dressed bridal party at the dais had a food fight with their guests. Newspaper wedding announcements regularly tell us the wedding couple already have two children together. Et cetera.

The originality of Jesus is again revealed in the skill with which He takes ordinary customs about Him and weaves them into His parables. He is a storyteller par excellence.

Tourists to European cathedrals will discover sculptures narrating this parable. The Nazarene is in the middle depicted as the bridegroom. Looking as though they have won a billion dollar lotto on His right are the five bridesmaids with oil. They represent those who have prepared for Christ. The foolish ones on the left are symbols for those who have not prepared. They hold their empty lamps upside down. They are losers all.

It is this latter group to whom our attention is drawn. The wise say, "A door that is shut is not so easily opened." A similar thought is expressed in the words, "For all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: it might have been."

No wonder the Pharisees listening to Jesus were angry with Him. He was telling them they were not prepared for Him.

But the parable, which is ranked among the top ten of the Master, was spoken not merely to the Pharisees. It is addressed to us. There is never a time when it is safe to take a vacation from the Christian life. Think of the priest who dies in the bed of a prostitute in the riveting novel "True Confessions." He illustrated the warning of Albert Camus: "I shall tell you a great secret, my friend. Do not wait for the last judgment. It comes every day."

It was impossible for the bridesmaids to buy oil late at night. Likewise, there are some things we cannot buy day or night. To paraphrase William Barclay, we cannot purchase character and virtue from an ATM machine or a credit card; we must develop our own. We cannot live like leeches on someone else's union with God; we must work up our own. We must pay our dues up front.

We must be ready for Christ when He comes knocking at the door for our already scheduled death. Jesus warns us today, "You know not the day nor the hour." "We must do long-range planning for the coming of Jesus at the end but just as important is short-range planning for Jesus' coming in the now and here." (Joseph Donders)

Salvation we are told is free but not cheap. So make sure that what you are living for is worth dying for.

If you say, "But God seems so distant, guess who moved."

