

08 November 2020: Matthew 25:1-13 (Proper 27)

In the New Testament there are many images for a life of faith: being part of a body, and a building; being in a flock; following a shepherd; being a light on a lamp stand; being salt that seasons, being healed; answering a call, being a disciple and student, learning from a teacher, going on a journey, having a relationship, being married. No single image can possibly sum up a life lived in and for Jesus Christ.

The image Jesus gives in today's Gospel adds to our understanding. Following Jesus is like being a bridesmaid waiting for the Bridegroom. Therefore, we live in vibrant expectation. Expectation of what? Of course, the appearance of the Bridegroom. When the bridegroom appears, wonderful things happen—there is the union of the bridegroom and bride: the engagement is over. And there is the joy of the wedding feast. We live in expectant anticipation of the union and joy Jesus brings. Let us take Jesus' teaching quite literally. We do not wait merely for eternal life, or salvation, or heaven by-and-by. We look forward to union with God in Jesus Christ, and the unspeakable, eternal joy that will be ours. Of course, expectancy itself is a kind of union and joy; not the full joy of consummation, but it is living today in the joy that will be soon ours completely. We eagerly long for the One who loves us and in whom our love will be expressed to perfection. In this sense, waiting for the beloved is its own joy, as when parted lovers exchange even a brief messages and treasure those messages as token of what will presently be fulfilled.

You surely noticed that all ten of the bridesmaids napped as they waited. This says that as we wait for our full consummation in Jesus, we live in very human ways: we are not angels, we are not super-human. God calls us to do what we can do, in our humanity. Falling asleep in the night, even when waiting for someone important, is a human thing to do; we must sleep. We offer our mortal natures to God. Therefore, our waiting is marked by humility. Paul writes that, 'we are not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought' (Roman 12:3). Is there anything less inviting in Christians than pride? Our faith in Jesus does not result in feelings of superiority but to the humility of knowing that our sins, though many, are forgiven as we forgive the sins of others. We need to remember that our best living for Christ is always because of the Holy Spirit's power at work in us, in the context of our own wounded, imperfect humanity; that we truly have no reason to boast, except in our Lord Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 1:30-31; 2 Corinthians 1:17-18; 11:30).

Jesus' story tells us that there is just one way of living in expectation of the Bridegroom's appearance: do now what will honor the Bridegroom at his appearing. Once the Bridegroom is at the door, the time for preparation is over; the time is fulfilled. To use a more contemporary wedding analogy, it would be like a would-be groomsman who, once the wedding procession has begun rushes out to find a tuxedo; by the time he returns, the wedding is over, the Church is empty; he has disgraced himself and shown disrespect to the wedding party.

We are wise in preparing for our Lord's advent. In using this term 'advent' I do not refer only to Jesus' Coming Again, but also to our Lord's coming to us every day. We prepare by doing that which will honor our Lord at His appearing. How do we do that: by living in, and through, and for Him; by making our lives a living expectation of encounter with Jesus; by offering ourselves for the union which will be ours in Him; by living now in joyful anticipation of His appearing. There is not a page of the New Testament that fails to instruct us on the way of expectation: kindness, forgiveness, reconciliation, honesty, charity, forbearance, honor one another, hope, and love; serving the poor, weak, and helpless—to give the briefest sampling.

To follow Jesus Christ is to live in expectant anticipation of the union and joy that Jesus brings. Such expectancy brings and expresses the first rays of union and joy; it is living today in the joy of what will be brought to perfection soon. Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.