

How often have we heard someone say of some project or undertaking; ‘We are in this for the long haul’. It is the attitude we were encouraged to take at the beginning of the first lockdown; one that we are being encouraged to take now. There is a need for consistency of effort, in good times or bad, in times of discouragement when we wonder is this ever going to end. We need to stay the course, we are in this for the long haul.

We read as our Gospel reading the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids. It is a story set in the context of the society in which Jesus was born and grew up, one that would have been familiar to his hearers. Weddings were community events that would have gone on over several days. As we read this story we can get lost in the details, the apparent selfishness of the wise.

When reading the parables I always remind myself that there is more to the story than the story itself, This is a story told with a purpose that goes beyond itself. The Gospel story as a whole is told not just in the individual stories and acts of Jesus but in the way all these are put together.

Take our Gospel reading for today. The Foolish Bridesmaids, having gone off to buy oil, come to the door asking:

“Lord, lord, open to us.” <sup>12</sup>But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.”

Do those words remind you of anything? Do they ring a bell?

Back in Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, towards the end we read of Jesus saying:

‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ....’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’ *Matt 7:21ff*

It is here that I want to go back to this picture of being in it for the long haul. I go back also to the the portion from the Book Joshua appointed as our Old Testament Lesson. Joshua, as he draws close to the end of his life, has assembled the people at Shechem for a renewal of the Covenant that was made on Mount Sinai. He challenges the people along the lines of; Decide now who you are going to serve. As for me and my house we will serve the Lord. When the people declare that they are going to follow suite, Joshua basically says; Don't make promises that you are not going to be able to keep. If you are going to take this on, you need to be serious, you need to stay the course. We are in this for the long haul.

To go back to our Gospel reading: we are used to looking at different groups in the Gospel story in terms of insiders or outsiders; the religious authorities as opposed to Jesus, Jews and Samaritans, Pharisees and publicans. The two sets of bridesmaids would have both seen themselves as insiders, both had been invited to act as bridesmaids, both would have addressed the bridegroom as ‘Lord’.

What separates them is not their theology, but rather their readiness to respond to the moment. The foolish are ill equipped for the long haul.

Each time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray 'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.' What matters as we await the Kingdom is our day to day faithfulness in seeking to discern God's will in the moment; our day to day faithfulness in love of God and love of neighbour. Taking each moment as an opportunity to serve, conscious that each encounter, with neighbour, with those in need, the awkward, the difficult is potentially an encounter with the Christ who calls us, who comes to meet us, who says to us, 'As much as you did it for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it for me.'

I will finish with a piece by Evelyn Underhill:

Lord, going out from this silence, teach me to be more alert, humble, expectant, than I have been in the past.: ever ready to encounter you in quiet, homely ways: in every appeal to my compassion, every act of unselfish love which shows up and humbles my own imperfect love, may I recognise you; still walking though the world. Give me that grace of simplicity which alone can receive your mystery.

Come and abide with me!

Meet me, walk with me!

Enlighten my mind!

And then, Come in! Enter my humble life with its poverty and its limitations as you entered the stable in Bethlehem, the workshop of Nazareth, the cottage of Emmaus.

Bless and consecrate the material of that small and ordinary life.

Feed and possess my soul.