

Urgent! Really?

Although it is clear through the tone of the last several weeks of the readings from Matthew's gospel that the confrontation between Jesus and the authorities is coming to a head. We know where we are in the calendar year...this is November...the month when we celebrate Thanksgiving and Black Friday...which seem to be two symbols of our current world...the one symbolizing our recognition of God and God's blessings...the other our turning our minds to the frenzy of the secular and commercial which has overtaken the coming season...the approach of Christmas and the celebration of the coming of the infant child...the babe born in Bethlehem. It's a dichotomy...one we often don't take time to appreciate that at this time of the year when we are preparing to enter Advent and anticipate Christmas, in the gospels we are in the final week of Jesus' life. At this moment on the church calendar we are looking at Jesus' life and message that was given in the week before Good Friday...before the Passion...before there is a resurrection message to proclaim. We already know there will be a light which will arrive...a hope of new life represented by the resurrection...but the message Jesus is giving is one spoken into a different time. There is an urgency in the words that he has for his disciples found in the parables that are recorded here and in the ones we will have before us the next two Sundays from Matthew's gospel...but do we take that urgency found there seriously...? We live in what is known by many as the "in-between times". That is defined as the time between when Jesus walked among us in the flesh and when Christ will come again at the end of time. Shortly after Jesus' ascension the disciples and early believers lived in daily expectation that this time was going to be short...even though Jesus had told them the timing was known only to the Father, their expectation was that the wait would not be long. As my professors would phrase it...Jesus died on Friday, he rose on Sunday, walked with them for fifty days and would be back shortly...surely before they died. In fact, it created a crisis when some of the first believers began to die and the return had not occurred. This sense of urgency about spreading the good news underlies a great deal of the words of the Apostle Paul and his need to keep moving from place to place so more would hear the message. Yet these events, all of them are now over two thousand years ago...there are centuries of these "in between times" which have come and gone...and the sense of urgency felt by the early believers has also gone for most of the faithful. For many reasons we no longer have a sense of urgency about the Parousia. There have been many who have claimed...falsely as it has turned out...at various points in time...that they know the timing of the "end time". They have convinced others that they must get prepared...and then that time comes and also passes...and it is just as Jesus told his disciples...only the Father knows when that time will come. Today's parable in particular has often been seen as Jesus' word about the Parousia or Final Judgment...it definitely applies to that as only God knows the timing of the second coming. Yet still, as Jesus is teaching his disciples at this crucial time in his ministry, knowing that his time with them is coming to an end, he is imparting to them a message which contains a sense of urgency, is all that he is saying is a reference to that final judgment day? Within these last three teachings found in Matthew, what is the urgent message which Jesus has for us? And is the message still a matter of urgency? That the parable of the ten bridesmaids is paired with the passage from Joshua where the Israelites are re-assembled by Joshua for a key matter of commitment to the Lord and God's commandments possibly gives an insight into what other issue seems urgent to Jesus at this moment in time.

Jesus opens this parable telling his audience that the kingdom of heaven will be like this: "Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps." Like all of the parables of Jesus, we are left trying to understand who the various characters represent. Obviously within this gathering of bridesmaids there is a clear division into two groups. The groups are defined simply as either being wise or foolish by whether or not they take extra oil for their lamps. They have a common goal to be ready to go with the bridegroom when he is ready. They are going to meet the bridegroom who is coming. The bridegroom represents Christ, the returning Messiah. But in this parable, the bridegroom's return is delayed. This delay causes them all to become drowsy and sleep, and their lamps begin to go out; they are not awake as the bridegroom approaches. When the bridegroom comes at midnight, the ones who had brought extra oil are able to trim their lamps and thus were ready to go with the bridegroom to the banquet. Those who had no extra oil asked to be given some of that extra the others had, but were told to go into town and purchase their own for there was not enough extra. When they did this, by the time they got back, the banquet doors were closed and they could not gain entrance because the bridegroom did not recognize them. The final word from Jesus was at the end of the parable was: "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." If we examine the setting of the parable we discover it would have been familiar to his audience. The situation Jesus is describing is one that was part of the wedding culture of his time. Marriage was arranged between families. The bridegroom went to the bride's family home to negotiate the dowry before the couple could leave to celebrate their wedding. The bridesmaids would gather outside the bride's home to escort them to the home of the groom's family. In this narrative, the negotiations have taken longer than expected...some disagreement about the bride price or dowry have occurred, or perhaps more congratulatory toasts have been raised causing delay...whatever the reason...the bridegroom is later than expected leaving and those waiting have become sleepy. This describes the "in between times" in which we live. We are indeed waiting for Christ's return. However, since we believe that God is still active and moving in the world, even as broken as it is, this parable may have a message for us that still carries some urgency. Perhaps the message within this parable for us living in the between times concerns what happens when God moves among us in the here and now. Consider that in the narrative as soon as the negotiations are over, the procession must begin...that is the moment for action and delay is not acceptable. In this parable we are the bridesmaids waiting outside the bride's house. Waiting...maybe awake...but maybe asleep...for the moment that God, the bridegroom may emerge and come and call us to rise and follow him. This is why the message is still one which has a message for us which carries some urgency. Because the call is to go with the bridegroom...and we never know the day or the time when our Lord has a task for us...a word to give to someone...an act of kindness to perform...a light to shine in someone's life. We, like the disciples and many people since then, want to focus on the final resolution...when Jesus in the gospels seems always to be more concerned with what we are doing in the here and now. Jesus' concern was for how we treat one another...for how the community he was gathering showed that love that he brought to them to all. So it seems that this parable's message might be asking or calling us to awake and aware when the call comes; to be ready to get up and go; that we have our oil ready so that our lamps will not be dimmed.

The question is then what is the oil in our lamps that we need to have with us. The oil in our lamps is our faith because although our faith can be shown in the way we live, it cannot be shared or "given to someone for their lamp." We need to keep our oil reserve strong by constant study of scripture, by continual prayer and by the practice of those things our faith asks of us. The practice of our faith need not be in the deeds that bring earth shaking changes but those things that show that we are alert to the possibilities that God places in our lives which can bring hope to those who need to hear a good word; to feel that they are heard when they need to say what troubles them; things that bring us closer to each other and to our Lord. And each day we are given the opportunity that was given by Joshua to those re-assembled people in the passage from Hebrew Scripture where he told them: "Choose this day whom you will serve." Each and every day we get to answer that call to be ready to follow where the Lord leads. That the final day or hour is not known does not mean that there is no urgency about being ready to answer the call when it comes for a particular need or task...there are many needs...many tasks...and the call from the Lord is to be ready to go, to serve and to offer care in his name. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.