

32nd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Year A

The other night I found myself walking towards the gate of heaven. On the way there I ran into some figures in the dark who were crying. “Why are you crying ?” I asked. “We’re crying because the Lord refused to let us in. He said he didn’t know us,” they replied. I arrived at the gate to find it locked. So with some hesitation and no little trepidation I rang the bell, knowing that it was the Lord himself who would answer.

As I stood there waiting, a terrifying question rose in my mind: Will he know me ? Of course he’ll know me! Ah, yes, but will he recognize me as one of his disciples. That’s the question. And it’s one I can’t do anything about now. It’s too late to change anything. I dreaded the thought that I might find myself excluded, an outsider, alone.

What’s he going to look for ? I asked myself. Then I thought of the parable of the lamps. He will look for a lamp that is burning brightly. What have I done with my lamp ? “Oh, good, I still have it,” I exclaimed. But when I looked at it I found to my horror that it had gone out.

However, at that moment I woke up to find that it was only a dream. What a relief ! It was just a warning that the Lord in his goodness had given me to wake me up, to shake me out of my carelessness.

The parable of the Gospel may seem odd to us; in Western cultures it’s the bride, not the groom, who arrives late. (*By the way, what is that all about? What is this thing about being “fashionably late”? Are women so stupid that they can’t even be on time for their own wedding? Why would you even **think** of keeping your partner and best friend waiting on the most important day of your life? Will **someone** please explain to me!!*) I’m sorry – I digress!! But in first century Jewish weddings the groom went with his friends to the bride’s house to collect her and her attendants., and then they all processed back to the groom’s house for the ceremony. There was no way of telling quite when the groom and his bride would arrive. So everyone got ready, and waited. If it was after dark, lamps would be needed.

Matthew places this parable in the context of what the Jerusalem Bible calls “the sermon on the end.” He groups together teachings on the theme of Jesus’ return to earth at the end of time. There was no doubt in Jesus’ mind that he would return in a visible but different manner to his coming

as a baby in Bethlehem. Then, he would call all people to account for their lives and inaugurate the new heaven and the new earth.

This parable focuses on Jesus' apparent delay. Why is he so long when his people suffer so much, and the world is in such a mess? Neither this parable nor any other teaching answers that question, but it does reassure us that he hasn't jilted his people. He hasn't gone back on his promise. He will come, one day, but we can never know in advance when that will be. In the meantime he calls on his people to watch and wait, with "oil in their lamps" – that is, always ready for service, always ready to welcome him.

The "oil in our lamps" is really the small things of daily life: faithfulness, punctuality, small words of kindness, a thought for others, our ways of careful and respectful listening, speaking and acting. They are the drops of love that keep our religious life burning like a lively flame.

Jesus shared our life, our loneliness, our anguish, our death. He is not far away from us. He is very close to us. We can touch, serve, and love him every day of our lives. With the oil of prayer and good works we must keep the lamp of faith burning, and he will recognise us. We won't be judged on a momentary lapse, but on our life as a whole.

Since we do not know the day nor the hour of the Lord's coming, we must be prepared so that when he comes we can enter his kingdom. And to be prepared means to be a doer rather than a mere hearer of the word.

All that Jesus says to us in this parable is meant as a warning. But it is a warning that is given out of love. It tells us that every moment should be beautiful. That the soul should always be ready for the coming of the Bridegroom, always waiting for the voice of the Beloved.