

The Thirty-Second Sunday of the Year 2011.

Weddings were very different in Jesus' time. They were arranged by parents at a very young age and the betrothal began. The marriage only began when the bridegroom brought his betrothed to his home and the consummation took place. And bridesmaids were far busier than they are in weddings in our own culture. The work was to be witnesses to the marriage even to the point of witnessing to the consummation of the man's marriage with his virgin wife. If they could not prove the bride was a virgin, she could be stoned to death (Cf Deuteronomy 22.13-21). A heavy responsibility indeed and one for which you needed plenty of oil in your lamp. Sadly the foolish bridesmaids could not carry out their task because they ran out of oil and they could not even enter the wedding celebration. Simply because they lacked the foresight to equip themselves with sufficient oil for their lamps. For whatever reasons those five bridesmaids failed to take seriously the task which they had accepted.

The parable leads us into a far deeper reality than Palestinian wedding practice in the first century. The readiness of the bridesmaids leads us to consider our own readiness to receive the life and love of God which is constantly offered us in Jesus Christ. In the words of our psalm today "For you my soul is thirsting, O God, my God...My body pines for you like a dry weary land without water." That thirst of a dry weary land without water describes what we are like without the love of God and tells us that we are created to find fulfillment and happiness in the gift which he offers. Our Old Testament reading describes this gift which completes human life as Divine Wisdom who is always close to us and always waiting to come to us. That gift is brought to us by the presence and action of the Holy Spirit which is God's gift to us in our relationship with Christ Jesus.

So the questions planted deep in our consciousness about the meaning of life and the satisfaction of our deepest desires find their answers and completion in the gift of Jesus Christ; the gift of his Divine Wisdom, which is the life that the Holy Spirit gives and the gift for which we thirst. How do we ensure that we are not like the foolish bridesmaids who miss the vital moment?

One thing is for sure and that is that they were not alert or watching with attentiveness and those are the two skills that the reading from Wisdom wants us to have. So how does that challenge us?

Our initial response to the parable of the foolish and sensible virgins could be that we are not like the foolish ones. We are not going to be caught out without oil for our lamps. But the parable challenges us to think again. The foolish bridesmaids were there waiting with the best of intentions and it probably had not occurred to them that they might need extra oil. Somehow the normal patterns of life, the excitement, the anticipation had dulled them to the need for practical preparation.

I want humbly to suggest that we are all like the foolish bridesmaids when it comes to opening our lives to the gift which Jesus brings, his life giving Spirit and his healing wisdom. None of us is completely bad, yes we have weak

points and we do the best we can in our lives, our work and our relationships. Yes, indeed we do the best to live life to the full. Ours is a world, full of opportunities for enjoyment, pleasure and fulfilment. Even in a time of economic difficulty, there are still plenty of resources around for us to live very rich and rewarding lives. Technology and the way we live our lives offer each of us an amazing and almost infinite variety of ways to spend our time. In fact for so many, each day is filled with a rush of travel and stimulation of one kind or another, some more appropriate than others.

I would like to suggest that this is precisely where the problem lies in our own time and culture. Life is so full, so rushed and it is all so important that we forget that sitting at our gate is the greatest, the most priceless and the most beautiful gift of all: God's gift of divine love and wisdom that can transform us in an unimaginable and an infinite variety of ways for good.

We forget, our spiritual senses are dulled, our eyes of faith our blinded and our hearts are hardened by the sheer routine and delight of life. How often do I hear that people have stopped coming to regular Sunday Mass, or have stopped praying or have lost interest in God. Not a great and conscious sin or act of rejection or denial but something far more subtle, far easier to do.

So back to our reading which tells us to be on the alert. Watching and alert by remaining aware that our faith and relationship with God so easily takes second place, no matter who we are because of the nature of life.

We are to be watchful and alert by growing in the conviction that our relationship with God in Christ is the most important part of life's experience and never to be neglected or clouded by the richness and fun of being alive.

At the end of the day we need to find a place in our lives for the discipline and routine which brings Christ into our lives and which cuts into the stultifying effect of the business of living; the discipline of daily generous and simple prayer; the weekly commitment to Sunday Eucharist; the vital skill of being fully present to every moment and every human being so that we can look reality full in the face. And it will always be true that the more we can encounter what is truly reality and be fully present to it, the more we can recognise Christ and his wisdom waiting for us at our gates.