

THE EMMAUS SERIES

32nd Sunday Year A

Wisdom 6:12-16

1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

Matthew 25: 1-13

The bridegroom is here! Go out to meet him

The last section of Matthew's gospel, before the narrative of the passion and resurrection, is a collection of Jesus' teachings urging readiness for death and judgment. The gospel readings for the liturgies of today and next Sunday (the last Sundays of the year's cycle) are from this section. Today we hear the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. The stern tone of the parable should not obscure for us the festive background this story would have called to mind for the original audience. The wedding customs of Palestine – different from our own – have not changed much over the centuries. They come to a climax with the arrival of the bridegroom and his friends at the home of the bride. Upon his arrival, the friends of the bride, who have been waiting with her, go out to join the groom's party for a ceremonial entrance. Those who heard the parable would have recalled that in the Old Testament, Israel's God was called the bridegroom of Israel. The rabbis used the espousal imagery of the Song of Songs in recalling this theme. The members of Matthew's community would have recalled that Jesus referred to himself as 'the bridegroom' (cf. Mt 9:35). The whole emphasis of the parable story, it is clear, is readiness for the coming of the Bridegroom. The 'cry' that goes up when he arrives, capturing the festive joy of the occasion, tells us of the eagerness with which the first Christians looked forward to the Lord's return. All the bride's friends are asleep – the Saviour's return, whether in the moment of death or at the end of the world's history - will come as a surprise to all. Though they are asleep, the wise bridesmaids are ready. Like the lover in the Song of Songs, they can say, 'I sleep, but my heart is awake'. We should not be distracted by their abrupt refusal to share their oil. Remember, in their original form the parables have one point to make. The foolish bridesmaids are removed from the scene to emphasis the point that only those who are ready will join in the festivities.

The first reading, from the book of Wisdom, is well chosen. In his story, Jesus calls the maidens who are ready 'wise'. Wisdom is greatly prized by the traditions of the world; it is a knowledge that helps us understand the things that really matter. Wisdom belongs to a set of Old Testament writings that give expression to a spirituality nourished by an outlook that comes from living one's life in harmony with the ways of God. As the parable invites us to ask ourselves whether we are ready to meet our Lord, and to review the loyalties and values that shape our lives, we may well ponder what is offered to us by God's Word in the first reading: the joy and peace that come from being in tune with God is there to be 'found by those who look'.

The first Christians looked forward eagerly to the Lord's return. With the passing of time, it became clear then to their period of waiting would be long. With the Saviour's resurrection, the last moment of God's plan has come; but as the second letter of Peter reminded those concerned about this delay, 'With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years' (3:8). These developments are echoed in the reading from 1 Thessalonians. It seems that when they embraced the faith and rejoiced in the union with Christ brought by baptism this community thought that they would not see death before the Lord's return. Some have died, however, and Paul is instructing them to remove their confusion. With them we can look forward to festivities in store for us. 'The Spirit and the Bride say, Come! ... Come, Lord Jesus' (Rev 22, 17, 20).

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