

An Expectant Preparation

When living in Egypt, we had an American priest over once to speak at a clergy retreat for the Episcopal Diocese of Egypt. And with the exception of myself, all the priests in the diocese were Egyptian at that time. And this guest American priest, for one of his reflections, selected today's Gospel text to speak from.

Now in most older English translations of the parable in our Gospel reading, the ten bridesmaids are referred to "ten virgins" (five wise and five foolish). And in the Arabic Bible, the word "virgin" is certainly used. And given that "sex" is not something one ever talks about publicly in the Middle East, certainly not in church or a mosque, it makes reading this parable out loud quite awkward. Especially among Arab male priests who happen to be on spiritual retreat in an ancient Coptic monastery out the middle of the Egyptian desert.

However, to make matters worse, the American guest, when getting to the "challenge part" of his sermon, asked us all, "Men,

tell me, would you rather be in the light with the wise virgins, or out in the dark with the foolish virgins?"

And there was this awkward moment of silence...with the priests embarrassingly looking down and sheepishly looking sideways at each other...and then the priests broke out in uncontrollable laughter!

Now, in cultures around the world, weddings are generally the biggest of parties.

And this is all the more so in the Middle East today...as it was in the Middle East back when this parable was told by Jesus.

And in our Gospel reading Jesus, the master of the Middle Eastern short story, tells a parable about 10 bridesmaids at a wedding celebration.

In Palestine at that time, instead of a newly married couple going away on a honeymoon, they would stay in their home village and have a sort of "open-house" for the local community.

The week following the wedding ceremony was a continual party and feast. And before the actual wedding ceremony the bridesmaids kept the bride company outside the groom's house, until the groom arrived.

They would bring their lamps/torches as they waited, as they weren't allowed in the streets at night without light. And the bridegroom could come at anytime – no one knew exactly when he would arrive.

Often, he was delayed because of protracted negotiations over the financial settlement with the bride's parents.

And it was an honor for the bride to have these discussions go on a long time – indicating how difficult it was for her family to part with her, or as is often the case today, how much they were requiring the groom to pay in the dowry. So, the bride and her party knew the bridegroom would be late.

However, whenever the groom approached, a messenger would run ahead and call out, "The bridegroom is coming!" This still happens in parts of West Africa today where I grew up.

The bridesmaids would accompany the bride, in a procession, into the house, following the groom, and begin a weeklong celebration!

Jesus' parable here speaks of 10 bridesmaids – 5 that are termed "foolish" and 5 "wise." Five are called foolish in that they didn't properly prepare for the bridegroom's arrival (by not having enough oil in their lamps for the wait). In contrast, the five called "wise" did prepare, having enough oil to take them through the night.

So, the first listeners had a cultural point of reference that made this parable come alive for them – and they would have all immediately gotten Jesus' point. Hence, most Middle Easterners today, especially those of Bedouin tradition, would see this like one of their own stories!

Now throughout the Scriptures the Kingdom of God is compared to a wedding banquet/feast – the most joyous part of the wedding celebration!

And the bridegroom is typically a symbol for God, used throughout the Hebrew Bible.

And the initial intention of the Gospel writer Matthew, in sharing this parable, was for the Jewish people at the time.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus told his people they were invited to the “wedding feast” – meaning “experiencing who God is and how God wants us to live - through Jesus’ teachings” – and the idea here is that “wise bridesmaids” are those prepared to recognize this and the foolish ones are those who don’t.

So, this parable comes from another place, another culture, and another time. And one could ask then, how could such a strange story about “wise and foolish bridesmaids” possibly be relevant to us today?

Well, while having a specific interpretation for that time, it also has some major insights for our own spiritual journeys – and especially relevant as we begin the Advent season in three weeks.

The primary lesson of the parable is about the need to “live in a state of *preparation*.”

Preparedness – the bridesmaids who didn’t prepare are considered foolish, and the bridesmaids that did, wise.

And *preparation* is really a summary of what the spiritual journey with God is all about.

For the life of faith is about continually preparing for the increased coming of God into our lives.

The oil in the parable can serve as a reminder of anything an individual must do in order to prepare for God’s coming anew and afresh in our lives.

An inner preparation that makes one attentive to the presence of God.

“To prepare the way” . . . to make God’s coming to us as smooth and easy as possible – which also entails working to remove every obstacle, obstruction and hindrance.

And perhaps one of the most common “obstacles” is simply there not being enough room or space for God in our all too crowded and busy lives.

Interestingly, while Western culture is often known as one of non-stop activity, work and noise...it is not just in the West. In Cairo, where we lived for ten years, a city of 20 million people that grew on average by 4000 people a day, average Egyptians lived in what was considered the noisiest and most chaotic city in the world. And hence the local urban culture in Egypt and throughout a lot of the Middle East is obsessed by the need for unending sound to accompany them.

It is not uncommon to be in a restaurant with music playing from loud speakers, several TVs on switched to different stations each at high volume, with car horns honking like crazy outside, and people yelling at each other at the table to talk over the noisy confusion!

And there is no question that all the loudness, commotion, intensity and the natural busyness of life can certainly hinder one’s connection with the Divine.

This is perhaps why Middle Eastern Christianity places such emphasis on the spiritual gift of the desert that surrounds them.

There is this wonderful Arab proverb that goes: “The further you go into the desert, the closer you come to God.”

And over the centuries the church has developed all kinds of spiritual disciplines to assist us toward preparing ourselves for God’s increased presence in our lives – fasting, prayer, reading of the Scriptures in various ways, compassionate service, etc...

But perhaps the deepest of the spiritual disciplines of preparation in today’s world is that of cultivating silence in our lives_– in order to make room for God. It is foundational for the spiritual life.

I recall the profound words of Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher; “The present state of the world and the whole of life is diseased. If I were a doctor and were asked for my advice, I should reply; Create silence.”

Jesus himself profoundly demonstrated this discipline – often we are told throughout the Gospels that he went off to a quiet place to be alone.

I think that Middle Eastern Christianity, that has been around for over 2000 years, has a tremendous amount to teach us in this area.

For example, monasticism was actually born in Egypt in the last years of the 3rd century, started by St Anthony, the first monk, a Copt from Upper Egypt. And ever since then the desert fathers and mothers withdrew from cities to the desert to listen to the voice of God.

And visiting St. Anthony's monastery in Egypt, near the Red Sea, the oldest monastery in the world, is a powerful experience. It is one of those places where its profound silence has a voice! A "voice" that by its very nature brings renewal, healing, restoration, freedom.

In Egypt, our annual clergy retreats were held at the 4th century St. Bishoi Monastery, a Coptic Orthodox monastery in the

Wadi Natrun part of the Western Egyptian desert (where Antoine de Saint-Exupéry crashed landed his plane which ended up with him writing *The Little Prince*).

And as you enter the main gates of this ancient place, there is inscribed on the arch that you pass through, the simple but profound words in Arabic of a 4th century Egyptian monk, "Silence is the direction on the pilgrimage to God."

Henri Nouwen, the late Catholic author on spirituality, writing about the Egyptian desert fathers, says, "...the place of salvation is called [the] desert, the place of solitude." "Solitude is the furnace of transformation....[the] place of conversion..."

He went on to write: "Precisely because the [contemporary] milieu offers us so few spiritual disciplines, we have to develop our own. We have, indeed, to fashion our own desert where we can withdraw everyday...and dwell in the gentle healing presence of our Lord."

Kahlil Gibran, the early 20th century Lebanese born poet and mystic, best known as the author of *The Prophet*, described himself as “going into the silence,” intentionally so. He said, “Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.” He even named his New York studio “The Hermitage.”

For there is a sense that as soon as we are really alone, we are with God – for silence enables us to hear and experience God.

Silence, if you will, is often the “audience-chamber” of God.

Paul Tournier, the late famous Swiss psychologist, from Geneva – a deeply spiritual man – once in an interview was asked about the importance of silence in the spiritual life.

This is what he said: “Modern people lack silence. They no longer lead their own lives; they are dragged along by events...If your life is chock-full already, there won't be room for anything else. Even God can't get anything else in. So, it becomes essential to cut something out.”

Coming closer to God requires learning to make room for silence – hence silence is not an end, but a means.

Our Gospel reading invites us lean into quietness, to embrace a listening posture, waiting for the still, small voice of God; that more often than not comes in the form of a whisper.

For silence is a place from which all sorts of new life is birthed. And nothing is more beautiful than experiencing God's presence in such a way that we realize we are in God's arms.

Today, that extra oil in the bridesmaid's lamps, enabling the wise bridesmaids to meet and celebrate with the Bridegroom upon his arrival, can be the “oil of silence” – where our hearts have prepared enough room for God to come to us.

And all this leads to living *expectantly*.

Our Gospel parable builds to a climax. There is an atmosphere of expectation all throughout the parable of imminent arrival.

There was great anticipation on the part of the bridesmaids. They were waiting with great expectation. And the result of the preparation is that the Bridegroom does arrive.

And perhaps the greatest need in continually preparing for God's coming to us -- is doing so with an expectant heart. Preparation is all about arrival. Someone is coming.... That is the promise!

As Simone Weil, the French Jewish writer and follower of Christ wrote, "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life." (First and Last Notebooks, p. 89)

The whole idea of our Reading is that the result of all our preparation is that God longs to come to us . . . into our lives afresh, over and over again.

And as the bridesmaids in our reading greeted the arrival of the bridegroom with joy and singing, not with tears, fear or any trepidation, it begs the question: "What does one expect God to be like?"

So many have a view of God that causes them to hold God at arm's length – at a distance.

Some Biblical scholars feel that the five "foolish" bridesmaids that were actually not allowed in (after they went and got more oil for their lamps), because they went to get more – instead of simply trusting that the bridegroom would have let them in regardless of not having lit lamps.

So, the question our reading presents to us, is not just, "Are we waiting expectantly for God – but waiting for God as God really is?"

God desires nothing more than coming to us – enabling us to fully participate in God's "wedding feast."

Our Gospel reading is an invitation to live in a state of preparation and expectation for God's coming to us anew this season.

In closing, I recently watched one of the most profound films I have seen in years. It's a French film, titled *Far From Men*, and it takes place in southern Algeria in 1954 (as the Algerian uprising against the French begins).

The story is about how the lives of two very different men, a French-Spanish teacher (played by Viggo Mortensen) and a Muslim Algerian accused of murder, are thrown together by a world in turmoil. . . and they are forced to flee across the Atlas Mountains.

There is this powerful scene towards the end of the film, as the Western teacher sends the Algerian off into the desert for his freedom (as he knows his own people, the French, will kill him). He sends him off into that vast Saharan desert with these simple and beautiful words (which he says in Arabic).

Trust in the Creator. He will be there for you.

Give to Him. He will give to you.

Ask Him. He will provide.

Is there really anything more to say? Amen.