

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Oil In My Lamp

The parable of the Bridesmaids, which forms the Gospel this Sunday, has always seemed to me to be uncharacteristically hard to understand. I also find most of the people in the story unattractive. The bridegroom is inconsiderately late, and when he comes, inflexibly inhospitable. The bridesmaids seem divided into two camps - some provident, yet ungenerous, the others slipshod and badly-provided. The whole occasion seems to our modern eyes ill-arranged and unpleasant, and no way to organise a happy wedding-day. Then there is much that is incongruous: what is so important about the lamps? Why are we told to *stay awake*, when both the wise *and* the foolish went to sleep? It's all very messy, and I can only agree with the scholars that the story has been interfered-with by many hands since Jesus told it. The sooner we get out of the allegory and get at the meat of the story, the better - or so it seems to me.

Please Come Properly Oiled

The early Church had a crisis when the Second Coming of Jesus was delayed. The first Church, in Jerusalem at Pentecost, seems to have expected the end of the world at any moment. They resigned from their jobs, liquidated their assets, and gave their all into the common fund; then they devoted themselves to an unworldly life of prayer and expectation. If you read the 2nd letter of Paul to the Corinthians (ch 8 &9) you will find Paul organising a charitable collection for them in the Greek churches. They had nothing left to eat, and were in great need. For many people this long wait for the return of Jesus was very disturbing. They began to question whether they had been told the truth. It's a good question, and it has been asked for nearly twenty centuries. I think this parable is among the many that are set to answer it. Of course, the question is an early-church one, rather than one asked during Jesus' lifetime.

Advents of Jesus

In the Gospel, there are many ways in which Jesus comes: *in disguise*, in the poor, the prisoner, the sick, the hungry and thirsty and naked: *stealthily*, like a burglar

in the night: *in glory*, but *without warning*, like lightning striking from east to west. The crop grows quietly and steadily; but when the time is ripe, the farmer's sickle goes in, and the field becomes a harvest in a single day. The injunctions that flow from these depicted comings are manifold: but they all say something like "Stay awake", "Stand ready", "Watch out"! We can take it that the oil in the wise bridesmaids' bags is to symbolize a readiness for a long wait. There is a little story about a steward who is left in charge for so long that he begins to behave as if he owns the place, and starts beating up the staff and raiding the cellar. His master, of course, arrives at the worst possible moment, and all is revealed: judgment-day! I suppose the virtue we are asked for here is that variant of love which is sometimes called *endurance*, sometimes *fidelity*, sometimes *patience*, and sometimes that old-fashioned thing, *providence*. It might be a long wait, but yet, when it happens, be very sudden. It might, in fact, be *now*....

Wisdom Does Not Grow Dim

The first reading may give us a good clue. It's possible to be wise, and to be out of key with everyone around you. Noah built his Ark to the jeers and mockery of those who looked on. They were looking at the wisest of men, but they only saw a fool. The Church also has plenty to say about the way of the world, much of which the world regards as irrelevant or unacceptable. This is a painful situation for us to endure. How are we to prepare for it? I believe the first principle is to remember where wisdom is to be found - with God, and not in us. If we end up trying to fuel our Christian lives ourselves, we'll soon exhaust ourselves and lose the plot. But if we treat every call on our stock of wisdom as a summons to seek out God, we shall find ourselves constantly refuelled. Behind their apparent repose, the wise bridesmaids are teaching us. In our short life we must begin to acquire the taste for Wisdom, and to keep its flame alight, even while other, more earthly lights burn - briefly - in the unwise world around us.

Fr Philip

