

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Bridegroom Is Here

Among parables this one is most intriguing. There are plenty of dead ends and wrong turnings to be taken: for instance, it isn't difficult to find ourselves criticising the wise bridesmaids for their mean unwillingness to share, or the bridegroom for his harsh judgement (which seem to spoil the generous atmosphere proper to a wedding feast). These, however, aren't the point of the story, which fits in to a growing feeling in the Gospel as a whole that the oncoming end of the world demands single-mindedness from all who wish to survive it.

Waiting In The Dark

It isn't quite clear where, in *Jesus'* mind, the bridesmaids' long wait comes from. Certainly *the Church* has been waiting for a long time for her groom to return; but does that mean that the Church, rather than Jesus himself, told this part of the story? Surely the delay is integral to the story; and we may find a setting for the delay in the wedding-customs of our Lord's time. Some scholars say that it was a custom for the bride's relatives to haggle for a long time over the gifts the groom would have to give in exchange for the bride, and that it was a form of courtesy to spin it out - expressing his ardour to win her, and her relatives' reluctance to let her go. However it was, we are given the clear picture of an impending festival that is yet delayed; and the demand on those who are expecting the joy of the feast is to wait with lit lamps, if necessary for a long time.

Stay Awake!

How are we to think about the oil supply? It relates directly to our attitude to the waiting, and finally to our determination to be in on the feast. *We have to do whatever it will take* in order to be inside when the door is closed. It might represent our need to stay faithful to hard tasks, or to be more than usually provident about the future; if we take marriage as an analogy, it seems clear that people who marry nowadays need something more than their parents did to survive and to be happy in it. We're told that, as the average marriage used to be only a couple of decades (since one or the other partner would be highly likely to drop off their perch in that time) nowadays even frail people can expect marriage to last into the third or fourth decade, or even more (*Lord and Lady Longford celebrated their 68th wedding anniversary this week - cor!*). To "keep

the flame alight" for all that time is a different challenge from a couple of decades. I'm sure that the readiness to *welcome one another* over many years - to share the home, the space in the heart, the good and evil experiences - must be very near to the welcoming of the bride-groom on the part of the bridesmaids. You have to live in an undefined readiness for one another, not demanding, not impatient, but not unwakeably asleep, not dead to the world. This is what is symbolised in the extra oil, always ready to replenish the light, in case *this* should be the hour when the bridegroom appears.

A Figure Of Expectancy

St Luke gives us a figure, at the beginning of his Gospel, who typifies the virtues of the wise bridesmaids. It's not a young girl, but an old man: it is Simeon, whose canticle sings the Church to sleep at Compline every night. The *Nunc Dimittis* is the song of an old man ready to go to rest in God. But it comes at the fulfilment of a lifetime of hoping, summed up in the phrase: *he looked forward to the comforting of Israel*. It was the Holy Spirit who gave him this sense of expectation, which brought him to the Temple at the very moment when Mary and Joseph entered, bearing the Messiah in their arms. Simeon saluted him as *a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of your people, Israel*. Perhaps he can help us to envisage the alertness to God Jesus demands in the parable of the bridesmaids. *You do not know the day or the hour*; but that mustn't mean not believing in them! Simeon turned up to the Temple as he did every day. He may have assumed that little was likely to happen there; but his own appearance was a sign of his faith, just as mine is when I come to celebrate Mass on a thin, ordinary morning of the year. Perhaps the readings chance not to inspire me. Perhaps I'm feeling low or have a bit of a pain. But today might be the very day when the clouds break, and I find myself meeting the Messiah. *Fr Philip*