

The Ten Bridesmaids

We are moving towards the end of the Church's year in two weeks time and the readings are now beginning to look towards the end of time and the final judgment. For this reason, we are being urged not to be complacent but to take on board that, for any one of us, the end could be soon, not the end of the world perhaps, but the end of our lives. It's a sobering thought.

Some years ago I had a heart operation and many months later went back to see the doctor to find out if everything was OK. He did all sorts of tests and listened to this and that through his stethoscope and said, "Well, as far as I can tell, you are fine and as healthy as anyone else of your age, but", he said, hedging his bets, "I can't give you a 100% guarantee. Only a couple of months ago a colleague, a doctor like me, aged 42, who went to the gym three times a week, was not overweight, didn't smoke and didn't drink, had no symptoms of any problems, went to leave the surgery at the end of the day and never got as far as his car. He collapsed in the car park with a massive heart attack and died almost instantly. So, you see, I can't say you, or anyone else, is risk free. We never know". This rather sombre thought echoes the theme of the Gospel. "Stay awake for you know not the day nor the hour".

The Gospel presents us with this curious and rather quaint story of the ten bridesmaids of whom five were wise and five were foolish. It was the tradition of Jewish culture at the time, or so one commentator claims, that the bridesmaids wait outside the bridegroom's house while the groom goes to fetch his betrothed from her father's house to bring her back to his for the ceremonies and feasting associated with a wedding. When he arrives, they will escort the happy couple into the house amid cheering and rejoicing. However, by tradition, the groom takes his intended round the town so that as many people as possible can meet and greet them and give them little gifts and small offerings of food and drink.

In a large community this can sometimes take many hours and the bridesmaids have to be on duty as the happy couple could arrive at any time. In the story neither group of bridesmaids were that on the ball. The text says that they all fell asleep on the job, it's just that five of them had something

in reserve; they had made contingency arrangements for the unexpected. I suppose this is something like having the foresight to make a will in case anything happens and not putting it off, something I write about in the newsletter. The equivalent in spiritual terms might be making sure you don't carry a grudge around thinking that one day you are bound to make it up but just now the time isn't right. Let there be no unfinished business in your life, no unreconciled quarrels, no withheld forgiveness that you are holding over someone as a kind of punishment. The author of the letter to the Ephesians advises: 'never let the sun set on your anger lest you give the devil a foothold' (Ephesians 4:26), and Jesus teaches that if we have something against another, we should go and be reconciled before coming to worship God.

You may have seen the film *The Missionn* where one man drags around a huge sack full of heavy armour in repentance for his sins. He even hauls in up the side of a mountain. It is a bit like this when we carry a grudge or nurse a grievance or cherish a hurt that we cannot bring ourselves to let go of. The burden is ours and it weighs us down though we do not realise how much until we eventually become reconciled and feel the weight of our uncharitableness disappear.

Wills help us to pass on things we value after we die, but there are some things we need to get rid of before death takes over and there is no longer the chance to make up quarrels, settle grudges and resolve conflicts before it's too late. In the opening prayer today we asked God to keep us 'unhindered in mind and body alike, [so that] we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours'. This way we ensure that we have some oil in reserve when our time comes for us to light the way to the banquet of heaven.