

One of the seasonal warnings we are well and truly familiar with in Victoria is to be prepared for the Bushfire season, - for people to clean out their gutters, - make sure that nothing that can catch fire grows too close to their home, - to have an evacuation plan in case they have to leave, and a small satchel at hand, already packed with the essentials, if they need to go.

Our Gospel picks up that theme with its story of the 5 wise and 5 foolish bridesmaids. It is one of the most cultural stories in the Gospels, and to grasp its message, it is well to be aware of some of the customs prevalent at that time: - most Jewish weddings took place in the evening, often after a full day's work, which explains the need for the oil lamps, and the tiredness of the bridesmaids as they dozed off waiting for the bridegroom.

Meanwhile the bridegroom would leave home at sundown to go to the home of the bride, but would take a most roundabout way through the village to receive the well-wishes of the villagers, and the more long-winded those villagers were, the later it would become. So all of the bridesmaids should have known the possibility of substantial delay. Then, when the bridegroom arrived they would all form up in a festive procession, lit by all those oil-lamps, to go to the wedding hall where the celebration would take place.

Obviously, what Jesus is doing here is to use that setting to invite his listeners to give some serious thought to the situation they could be facing at the end of their lives, or at the end of time, when the Bridegroom comes to accompany them to the wedding hall. That's why Jesus chooses the mid-night hour.

Important, therefore, is the readiness the bridesmaids to have their lamps lit ready when the bridegroom arrives, to light their way to the wedding hall, but the crunch comes when the foolish girls ask the wise ones to share the extra oil which they had brought. Now it may seem churlish, or even un-Christian, not to share that oil, but it is well for us to remember that there are things we can't share on the spur of the moment, - things that only come with practice, like the balance you need to ride a bicycle, or the knowledge you have learned through study.

Now, if we can get away from thinking about this parable as a real-life story, and accept it as the comparison it is, then we can start thinking about our own readiness, our own preparation, to join the bridegroom on his way to the wedding-hall, - to join Jesus in his glory.

And that is where the other two readings we have today come to the fore. The first reading is a poem in praise of wisdom, and the benefits it can bring to our life, but here again we need to remember that it doesn't come to us on a plate. For the most part it is the result of experience and self-discipline.

Wisdom requires that we stop and think, that we weigh up the consequences of our decisions and accept full accountability for our actions. Wisdom requires that we learn from our mistakes and make sure we don't repeat them. Nor it is something that comes automatically from living a long time, the so-called wisdom of old age, - we have to work on it! Yet, that reading also makes it clear that wisdom is not the prerogative of the elite, the highly educated, the nobility, - that it is readily available to anyone actively loving it, desiring it and seeking it out.

The same wisdom applies to our second reading, which urges us not to grieve, irrationally, about people who have died. We are a people of hope, and of faith in eternal life and the Communion of Saints. Our partings are not forever, except where we have lost all hope and faith in God's loving and forgiving mercy. There is always hope that even at the very last moment of life, those who have died were able to make an act of faith in a loving God, and surrendered themselves to his will. That's how St. Paul, at the end of that reading, urges that we should comfort one another with such thoughts.

The message of today's readings, therefore, is to bring home to us the wisdom of being prepared, - of recognising that we can't get to heaven, to our eternal destiny, on someone else's merits, but only on those which, with Christ's help we have gained for ourselves, and therefore to make sure that we are ready when that final call comes, and the Bridegroom calls for us to join him in the wedding hall.