

Sunday, 12, 2017

32nd Sunday of the Year (A)

Conventual Mass Stay Awake You Know Neither the Day nor the Hour

Autumn has finally arrived! The weather has become cooler and the leaves are turning. Autumn is late this year but in one form or another it eventually arrives. Fall with all its beauty presages the end of nature's cycle and the end of the calendar year. It is no matter that in this end already lie the seed of the spring to come with its gentle yet spectacular beauty. The present time we live in foreshadows another end when the world as we know it will come to an end and be taken up into a new creation. It will be a new springtime of the Kingdom of which we at present know so little. But come it will. Our liturgy reflects this time of an end as well as its promise of glory. "Watch and be vigilant for you know neither the day nor the hour."

The liturgical year began with Advent and took us through the cycle of Redemption. It began with Israel and the world's yearning for a Redeemer. It took us through the life and teaching of Christ preparing us to become heirs of the kingdom through Christ's life, death and resurrection.

And now, in conjunction with the season, the Church points us to the end of the world and of history as we know it. But it is not an end which spells annihilation but an ending which promises the in-breaking of the Kingdom, a new and glorious beginning. It's all about the coming of Christ. After all, even autumn is not only a time of endings but also a time of gathering in of the year's fruits and preparation for spring.

But as every gardener and every farmer knows, the produce we look for in the fall does not appear magically

but requires labor even intense labor on our part. Getting rid of weeds is but the least part.

And so, Christ, whose mission it was and still is, to make us heirs of the kingdom, not only teaches us how to respond to God's plan for us but also realistically the cost. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself; and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Christ shows us the way into the Kingdom; Christ is the Way. The walk is to be made with perseverance and vigilance.

It is insufficient to dig up the soil and plant the seeds. If we want to enjoy the fruit of the garden we must pay it constant attention: weed, water, protect it from pests that would destroy. And that is the message of today's gospel: "Be watchful and vigilant for you know neither the day nor the hour." Speculation about the end times is pointless

and misses what Jesus was trying to tell his disciples. He himself has said: “Of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone knows” (Matthew 24:36). But the Kingdom will break into this world as we know it and Christ will come in glory.

Just before the parable of the ten virgins or bridesmaids, Jesus foretold the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Then Jesus went on to speak of his second coming in apocalyptic terms followed by three parables on the need for watchfulness “for you know neither the day nor the hour” These parables make us understand how we are to live in the present in the perspective of that final Day. “The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins invited to a wedding” (Matthew 25: 1-13).ⁱ

Like Jesus' other parables, this one is based on real life. It tells of a contemporary custom in which the bridesmaids would go to the bride's house to await the arrival of the bridegroom. Then people would go in procession with the bride and groom to the place where the wedding was celebrated. But here Jesus introduced several unusual elements to make a point: the interminable lateness of the bridegroom who kept people waiting and the five young women who went out to buy oil, as if they would still find shops open at that hour, the closing of the banquet hall door so contrary to the oriental custom of hospitality and the harsh reply to the latecomers "I do not know you." But a parable is not a narrative of an event. Rather, the storyteller is free to exaggerate to fit his point.ⁱⁱ

The wedding is an eschatological symbol pointing to the definitive marriage of God and his people. The virgins are termed “wise” and “foolish” in view of the parable’s outcome. Their role here is to symbolize the Christian disciple. Since all the virgins sleep, the point being made is preparedness rather than constant alertness. The oil stands for a state of readiness.ⁱⁱⁱ

The bridegroom’s late arrival at night points to the uncertain and unexpected time of the Lord’s coming. The “foolish” virgins’ request for oil, their request for entrance to the wedding feast and the groom’s response center on the difference between faith or belief and actual conduct. Election of itself gives no assurance of salvation. This parable highlights the importance of a lived faith.^{iv} It is the oil which allows us to see the face of the Bridegroom by its light.

It is safe to say that the thought of the Lord's return does not weigh heavily on people today. The early Christians expected his immanent return and it made a difference in how they lived their lives. In the last two thousand years we have, for the most part, lost that sense of immediacy. And yet it is at the very center of our belief. The Lord will come again!

A good life always reckons with a Lord who is close at hand. And the fact is that we have everything to look forward to. What we look forward to, we will prepare for as well. It's the wise thing to do.^v The autumn weather, the fall foliage, the gardens laid to rest, remind us.

i" Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year v.4 (Collegeville, Min., Liturgical Press, 2004) 23

ii" Days of the Lord, 24

iii" Roland J. Faley, Footprints on the Mountain (New York, Paulist Press, 1994) 713

iv" Roland J. Faley, 713

v" Roland J. Faley, 714