

SEMPER PARATUS/ALWAYS PREPARED

Many years ago three friends and I went to the movies with me on a cold December night. When we came out it had sleeted and the entire car was covered with ice and the streets too. There was no ice scraper to be found anywhere in the car. And, of course, as sometimes happens with older used cars the heat was not working. We tried to defrost and nothing happened. Finally one guy had his school ID card and we used that to chip away a small 6 inch by 6 inch cleared part of the windshield for me to look through as I drove everybody home. It was cold, slippery and nasty. We were coming down a hill that had a very slight levelling off point where the railroad tracks came through and then continued to decline into our little town.

I was leaning as close to the 6 inch space as I could, constantly wiping the fog away and using windshield wipers to keep it kind of clear. I hit the levelled off place and then continued down the hill. Right behind me a train passed. Not five feet behind us. No crossing barrier. There was a red light but invisible to me. It was the grace of God. I never saw it. Literally one less second would have killed four young men. We thought we were prepared and we were not at all prepared. We had not given a thought to the weather and conditions that might happen. We were just in the moment and thinking of going to the movies. We were not paying attention although we probably thought we were. We all learned a lesson that night because the guys in the back seat saw the red light and thought I did and would stop. I never saw it. They were scared to death.

Be prepared. Are you? How prepared are you? And more important are you preparing your children to be prepared too? I mean for the most important things besides the ordinary things. We all make decisions. We choose what our children will get involved with, what activities they will participate, what sports or music they will play, what schools they will attend, how they will learn about their faith. In making such decisions we try to look into the future and see to it that when the things that can happen to young people begin to happen they are somewhat prepared. But we have to make the decisions about what is most important and prioritize things for them.

When I was growing up my parents said “No” to me much more than they said “Yes” to me. I didn’t like that but it helped me. It served to prepare me. They didn’t do this because they hated me. They did it because they loved me. They did not let me do everything I wanted to do. They did not give me everything I wanted. They realized that I had to learn things: like delaying my gratification, learn how to be patient and wait for things, learn how to get along with my siblings and be fair and make sure that forgiveness was real and spoken. They taught me about integrity and how my word was to be my bond. No lying. They were on the watch for the things that can go astray in a family. It took constant vigilance. It was wearying and I am sure they didn’t like being the heavy all the time. But it worked. It was necessary. They were vigilant. They were watchful. They were thinking ahead and they were prepared, as prepared as they could be given the surprises of this life.

That is what today’s story is about. Some of the virgins are prepared and some are not. Some were paying attention and some were not. Paying attention or not paying attention to what? To where God shows himself in life and what God asks of us in life while the rest of life is going on all around us. They were a little lazy or negligent or lackadaisical. Some were pretty used to having someone else pick up for them or get them out of a difficult situation of their own making. They weren’t really applying themselves, they were taking the easy way. “I don’t have enough oil for my lamp. Give me some of yours.” But it doesn’t always work like that.

It doesn’t always work like that because the oil in my lamp is the energy of the Holy Spirit in me that I cooperate with. If I don’t apply myself or only apply myself on things that I want to do or which are important only for me then I will not be prepared. I will not be ready. And my children will not be prepared either. The Lord comes whenever He comes. He graces each of us but if we are not paying attention, if we have not learned how to recognize when and how God shows himself in our lives then we will be like the virgins at the dealers when the Bridegroom arrives for the wedding banquet. The oil in the lamp is virtue, real virtue that is in me because I have been living it. Not pretend virtue or virtue for show only. You cannot give an infusion of virtue to another person. Either it is in there or it isn’t. You cannot give it even if they ask you for it. It just isn’t transferable.

We are in November. The end of the calendar year is 7 weeks away. The end of our liturgical year is a couple of weeks away. We have to get ready for Thanksgiving. We have to get ready for Christmas. But if we do manage to get ready for those two great feasts are we still preparing our children for what they will be facing in a few short years? We all know that this is serious stuff and it happens right on our level not resolved by those in government. This is on us. And I think that is precisely the point that Jesus is making here. This is on us. Thank you for coming to Eucharist and for devoting your lives and energy and decisions to preparing your family for the world that is coming. And remember—it does not all depend on you. Give God the time and give God the opening to be the help you need the most.