

O when the saints

Crisis circumstances can come at any time, of course.

When I was recently in the hospital, they were distributing various magazines. There were stacks of one to do with fertility—I wasn't really too interested in that one. But there was a publication called *Enfants du Québec*, and there were some interesting articles in that publication.

One of them concerned a woman who knows very well the complaints of the older generation about the younger generation—how they don't seem to stick together as married couples. On the first provocation, they split. She didn't think that she was one of those persons. However, when she discovered that her husband had already “abdicated” (in her words), and done so for some time, well, the separation became virtually inevitable.

Of course, that was a crisis that she didn't anticipate, and it caused her grief, lots of anger, I am sure, doubting of her own abilities, likely, and so on. But this young woman, aged thirty or so, has two young girls, age 4 and age 1. And she decided that—despite the situation where her children would be, every other weekend, or every other Saturday, with their father—she decided that these children would, by no means, be lacking in love. She resolved that she would do her darndest, basically, to communicate love, and bring up these children in love.

What she discovered, however, was that these little girls taught her something—taught her to forgive their father; and they also taught her that hugs and kisses from them would go a long way in relieving some of the pain that she was experiencing. And, furthermore, they taught her, over a period of time, to accept herself, not as a perfect mother, but one that they had, and the best one for them, therefore.

Well, as I have said, crisis circumstances can come our way. And we can receive instruction from various sources. And it can be from very young children, even.

In the passage of scripture I read to you from Matthew's gospel, there is a description of a crisis, an embarrassing situation involving some bridesmaids. Some of the bridesmaids found themselves unprepared at a decisive moment, and were shut out of the banquet, therefore. Truly, an embarrassing moment.

Now, in that parable, however, there is looming in the background a much bigger crisis. And this seems to be signalled, not only because it is a parable of Jesus, but because some elements of the parable do not seem to correspond to our expectations. There are some—shall we say—dissonant elements in the parable which cause us to sit up and take notice.

For one thing, these bridesmaids, they are all waiting for—not the bride, whom we might anticipate, but—the bridegroom. That may seem a bit odd in and of itself. I can't say that I am an expert in Palestinian marital customs or marriage customs. But, from the perspective of our own society, it seems odd that they were associated with the bridegroom, rather than with the bride.

These people have not come prepared—or five of them; five *have* come prepared with the necessary oil from their lamps. Five have them have not come prepared. And, when the moment comes, and they need to be ready, they are looking for help from the other five. But here is one of those grating moments, those dissonant elements of the parable—the five wise ones will not in

any way share what they have with these five rather irresponsible bridesmaids. And so those five have to go their way and find their own oil to fuel lamps. But, in the meantime, the bridegroom comes. They go into the feast—that is, the five wise bridesmaids—and join the feast. But, later, the five foolish bridesmaids come. They knock on the door, expecting that they could be let in, that their excuses would be accepted. They were unprepared; but, you know, could you have a little mercy here. Well, no. They are barred entrance. The bridegroom, who is addressed as “Lord, Lord”, will not allow them into the feast.

So, there is behind the scene, a much bigger crisis that speaks, not only to those bridesmaids, but speaks to us. It’s the crisis of the coming of the kingdom of God. And the passage challenges us to be prepared for that, and not be like the foolish bridesmaids and come up short.

So how can we be prepared? Now, there are a number of parables of Jesus which speak of being prepared. For example, Jesus tells the parable about the person who sets about building a tower. But, unless he has calculated correctly, he won’t be able to finish, and he will become a laughing-stock. Or, another parable associated with that, and just like that—one leader of an army encounters another leader of an army. But he has to determine whether he has adequate forces in order to meet this opposing force. And, if he doesn’t, disaster looms. So he has to think very carefully.

Preparedness is certainly part of Jesus’ message, in several portions of the New Testament. And there is also a description of what this preparedness might entail. So, for example, in the parable of the foundations, Jesus said, “The wise person is the one who hears my words and does them, whereas the foolish person is the one who hears my words and doesn’t do them” and compares them to a foundation, put on rock, versus a foundation set on sand. In another saying of Jesus, people come to him in the kingdom, saying, “Lord, you were in our streets; didn’t we do all sorts of miracles in your name?” And the Lord says to them, “I never knew you, you workers of iniquity.” They did not do, they did not follow, the commands of the Lord. So following the commands of the Lord is essential in being prepared for this crisis, which is the coming of the kingdom of God.

Now, just let me elaborate a bit further on that. Disciples obey Jesus’ commands. But disciples, as we are told, in Matthew’s gospel, also share this message with other people. So the disciples encountered the risen Christ, and he said to them, “Go and make disciples...” At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, he said, “You are the light of the world...” “You are the salt of the earth.” So part of preparedness, I would suggest is that we ourselves are to be followers of Jesus, obviously, responding to his teaching, but also, being like him in communicating the gospel to others, being people who are outgoing in the sharing of the gospel. That is our preparedness for the kingdom of God, which can come like a thief in the night. It can come like an emergency. To be prepared, we need to be part of a group of people who communicate the teachings of Jesus, the reality of the kingdom of God, to others.

Now, these foolish bridesmaids thought that they should be given special treatment by the wise bridesmaids. And, sometimes, we might feel that we can just tag along, ourselves—not take any personal responsibility ourselves for being prepared for the crisis which is the coming of the kingdom of God.

However, this passage tells us that we have our responsibility. We join with others, of course, in living out that responsibility. But we ourselves are called, personally, to be responsible, to be prepared for that coming kingdom of God.

In this passage, the foolish bridesmaids come to the door, and, no doubt, they are expecting that their excuses would be received by the Lord, by the bridegroom. But, in fact, those excuses are not received. We can live our lives by excuse, by making excuses for our behaviour, or lack of action, or whatever. Or, on the other hand, we can be people who repent, who change the course of our lives, at the inspiration and instigation of God's presence in our lives. We can make change, real change, such that we are not making excuses anymore, but rather repenting and changing course of action, in order to be more fully the people that God would have us be. And that is part of our preparedness for the emergency, the crisis, which is the coming of the kingdom of God.

So, crises can come in a variety of forms, as we know. And I mentioned the one woman—the crisis came in terms of learning that her husband had, really, opted out of their marriage relationship.

But, in the bigger picture, we have this crisis which is the coming of the kingdom of God, for which we are to be prepared. Part of that preparation is not only following the teachings of Jesus, but sharing those, being a missional people. A part of that is joining with others, rather than being a burden on others. Part of that is learning repentance as a daily—weekly—phenomenon, in our lives, rather than making excuses for ourselves. All these are ways in which we can be prepared for the crisis which is coming, which is the crisis of the coming of the kingdom of God, for which we must be prepared.