

Shortly after I became parish priest in Cameron, Missouri, I met a man who had killed four of his best friends. He didn't intend to do it. He was out drinking with them one night very late, got behind the wheel of a car with all of them as his passengers, and he crashed the vehicle. In the United States we call that involuntary manslaughter. This man did not wake up one morning and plot a way to kill the people he liked the most. He made some very bad judgments and became responsible for their deaths. I met him not at our parish church, of course, but at our local state prison, where I had begun doing some ministry. By the time I met him, the accident lay some years in the past, though its consequences were undying. He was sorry, and he was now trying to live responsibly. He read a book almost every day. He studied a lot of law. And he supported the new work of his mother, who had joined a campaign against people who made bad decisions as her son did, an organization called Mothers Against Drunk Driving. What struck me most about this man is that he seemed in every other respect to be quite normal. He communicated well, he was intelligent, he had a strong faith in God, as well as a love for the church; he was anxious to help other people. He broke down my stereotype of prisoners. Conversations with him resembled conversations with anyone else in my parish in topic and style. We are all guilty of making bad choices; terrible consequences may come from them. But quite honestly, sometimes they don't. Sometimes you get behind the wheel having had too much to drink, and you do not crash the car. When bad results don't follow bad choices, we start to think we can get away with it. We become careless.

Five virgins in Jesus' parable had become careless. In the big picture, the consequences from their choices were not so bad. They did not accidentally kill anyone. They just got excluded from a big party starting after midnight. An older generation wouldn't have found that much of a punishment anyway. But the parable issued a bigger warning. You don't know when you will be invited to do something fun, or expected to perform something great. You don't know when. You'd better be ready all the time.

We hear this parable near the end of the church year and of the civic year as a warning about our entire life. We are not sure when its end is coming. If we know the deadline on a project, we can move heaven and earth to get it done. If students have an assignment due at the end of a term, they will stay up late to finish it on time. If a job application needs to be submitted by a certain date, you will have it ready. If you are preparing your home for the arrival of a child, if you are organizing the details of a wedding day, or if you have guests coming for dinner, you become increasingly more focused in the days, hours and minutes preceding the event. Apparently, Jesus valued people with that kind of focus. They have important goals. They plan well. They prepare for what they need. And when the time comes, they are ready.

In these weeks that bring our church year to a close, it is time to scrutinize how we live. What bad choices are we making? Have we become drowsy to the dangers that surround us? If we continue the pattern of our current thinking, acting, and speaking, what might happen to us and to the people we love? The church year is handing us a deadline with the ominous words of Jesus: "You know neither the day nor the hour."