

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Disaster preparation begins when we are kids and seems never to end. When I was in Catholic grade school I learned what to do in case of a tornado, a fire, or a nuclear bomb. Today's kids also learn signs of illegal trafficking, violence and abuse. Parents learn the basics of first aid. Even fastening your seat belt in a car or on a plane prepares you for the worst. No one wants to think about disaster, but we want to be prepared.

Today's readings take a twist on this, focusing not so much on preparation for disaster, but preparation for blessing. Jesus' parable praises servants who stay prepared for the master's return. Alluding to his own upcoming departure, Jesus advises, while the master is away, "Gird your loins and light your lamps." If they do, upon the master's return, he will reverse the roles: The master will "gird himself, have [the servants] recline at table, and proceed to wait on them."

To prepare for this gospel the lectionary gives us a rarely-heard excerpt from the Book of Wisdom. Today's first reading concerns the first Passover, some 1500 years before this was written. People were still teaching the lessons learned from that event. In the Book of Exodus, Moses urged the people to eat the Passover meal with "loins girt" (Exod 12:11), in a hurry, ready to go, even in the night. Following the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, Pharaoh indeed commanded the people to leave, and they fled. They were ready not because of disaster preparation but because of blessing preparation. They believed God would deliver them, so they waited, always ready. The Book of Wisdom says, "The night of passover was known beforehand to our fathers, that... they might have courage." The verses then address God directly, "Your people awaited the salvation of the just and the destruction of their foes." They expected it. They were offering sacrifice in secret as God had commanded, waiting faithfully, confidently for the day of their deliverance.

Disaster preparation helps us in many ways, but Christ invites his followers into blessing preparation. We are like the parable's servants awaiting the return of their master; we are like ancient Israel awaiting the moment of deliverance from slavery. To be ready, we offer the sacrifice God has commanded, and even in the dark we gird our loins and light our lamps.

What does blessing preparation look like? You know the basics. Say prayers every day, whether alone or with others in your home. Keep Sunday Mass and communion a cornerstone of your spiritual life. Learn about your faith. Socialize with other Christians. Make decisions based on charity. That will train you to do the right thing when it matters most. Avoid temptations that will take you away from God, especially those that afflict people in the night. Keep a lamp of faith lit at all times, particularly in the dark. And, above all, "have courage," a virtue the Book of Wisdom says our ancestors possessed. You believe that God can rescue you from sin and death. Have courage that this will happen.

A story is told of people suffering in a time of drought. Local religious leaders gathered with the faithful to pray for rain at a predetermined place. As they all assembled, a child seemed bewildered and asked, "Why didn't we bring umbrellas?" With courage, we don't expect disaster. We expect blessing.

Sunday, August 7, 2022