

December 22, 2013
The Sunday Before Christmas

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings
Delay?

The last of Matthew's five great discourses, which treats of the final days of the world, provides hints of a delay before the end. Before the parable of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:31-46), there are three parables that contain such hints: the faithful steward (24:45-51), the five wise maidens (25:1-13), and the talents bestowed on three servants (25:14-30). We may look at them in turn:

The first account contrasts the faithful steward with an evil employee who "says in his heart, 'My master is delayed (*chronizei*)'" Deceived by this apparent postponement of the master's return, the scoundrel proceeds "to beat his fellow servants" and generally get himself into mischief. The faithful steward, however—wiser and more vigilant—does not grow weary in the labor entrusted to him. The point of the trial of these two men is their experience of a delay in the master's return.

In the second story ten maidens await the coming of the bridegroom. Only five of them, however, maintained sufficient vigilance when "the bridegroom was delayed (*chronizentos*)."

The sufficiency of this vigilance is symbolized in the extra oil they brought for their lamps.

In the third parable a departing master provides differing measures of resources—*talenta*—to three of his servants, with a view to testing their stewardship. Whereas two of them do pretty well, the third fails miserably. The nub of the trial consists in the prolonged passage of time: "After a long time (*meta polyn chronon*) the master of those servants came."

In each story the differing fates of the characters has to do with their handling of *chronos*, the prolonged time preceding the arrival of the Expected One, *ho Erchomenos* (Revelation 1:4). Thus do these three parables, each of them concerned with the Final Things (*ta eschata*), open the door to the period of Church History, that unknown measure of days intimated by the Good Samaritan when he told the inn keeper, "when I come again, I will repay you" (Luke 10:35).

What is required, in each story, is not only patience with the delay but also the practical application of prudence. There are things *to do*. Thus, the steward in the first parable is not only “faithful”; he is also “sensible”—*phronimos*. He keeps his head about him, when the master makes him “ruler of his household, to feed them at the proper times.”

In the second parable, likewise, five of the maidens are called “sensible”—*phronimoi*—inasmuch as they bring sufficient oil to fuel their lamps, for no matter how long. With no clear idea when the master will return—for “of that day and hour no one knows” (Matthew 24:36)—they are ready to “go the distance” with Salvation History.

In the third parable all three servants await the master’s return. The point of the story is what they *do* while they wait. Once again, the accent is on the prudent application of resources.

All three accounts illustrate the final parable of the Sermon on the Mount, the story of the “sensible man (*andri phronimo*) who built his house on a rock” (Matthew 7:24). He, too, understood the practical application of prudence. Jesus contrasts him with the “foolish man (*andri moro*) who built his house on the sand.” This *aner moros* is replicated in the *pente morai*, the “five foolish” maidens awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom. All of them fail in diligence and good sense.

The foolish people in these stories were creatures of the moment, who had not cultivated a practical wisdom. They appeared to do fine until “the rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew.” Living mindlessly in the now, they became the trampled victims of *chronos*.

The prudence required in these parables includes a cultivated habit of reflection, a practical understanding of history, and a sensitivity to God’s purposes through the vagaries of time.

The Church lives in the interval between the *event* of Jesus Christ and his Second Coming. Since Matthew’s Gospel indicated that this interval might be prolonged, the Church—rather early—took care to prepare oil for the lamps and to craft suitable institutions to preserve the oil. Major among these resources, surely, were the biblical canon, the ordained ministry, and the structured components of the worship, centered round the Sacraments.

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