

## Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Aug 28th 2015

Light dawns for the just; and gladness for the upright heart.

St. Augustine is memorialized today. Having initially led a dissolute life and subsequently converted, he is a fitting example of a person who finally heeds the signs and guidance that God will provide. The first reading is an exhortation from Paul to the Thessalonians. Many of the new converts there, it seems, were struggling with personal difficulties similar to those encountered by young Augustine.

Thessalonica was a port city with thousands of inhabitants. It was cosmopolitan and many of the people worshipped many Gods. The Jews, of course, also had a strong presence. Paul thought that his new converts may be threatened by some of the local pastimes and mores. He spelled this message out in particular with regard to finding a mate for life. Apparently lust had crept into (or stayed) in the equation. Paul, rather than being prudish, seems to be making a case for choosing a long-term relationship based on Christian principles. He wanted the group to multiply and endure through the years. A relationship based primarily on physical beauty or lust would fade, as does our youth. God, he reminded them, “did not call us to impurity, but to holiness.” If you ignore this, you ignore the wishes of God.

The gospel for today is a parable that seems to stand alone and out of context. It seems that so many parables could come under the heading, “Hard Words from Jesus”. I have always been amazed at the power of a story (or a parable) told by a seasoned and skillful speaker. Some of the best stories seem to be told by close friends or relatives who can mesmerize young and old around a campfire or at an after dinner gathering. I imagine that Jesus could quickly bring a group together when it became apparent that he was not only a good speaker, but also a learned man whose parables could challenge a person to think. Let us imagine Jesus on a hillside, just on the edge of a small town; a group gathered to hear him speak.

“Let me tell you the story of the bridegroom and the ten virgins”, He may have begun. As the parable unfolded, it became apparent that the story was not going to be about a wedding feast, but really about the preparation for the feast, and how one should remain attentive while waiting for the Bridegroom. He points out that there were two groups of virgins. One group was well-prepared; the other group was not as well-prepared, or possibly not at all prepared, to receive the bridegroom. Before the bridegroom arrives, extremely late, some of the less-prepared virgins have gone away to purchase more lamp oil.

Those who had enough oil to light the bridegroom’s path, and to welcome him, were invited into the reception. Those who were away were not allowed in when they returned. The crowd is quiet and they lean in toward Jesus to hear the remainder of the story. “Lord, Lord, open the door for us!” say the late-arriving virgins. Jesus catches the crowd off guard when he suddenly stands and says in a loud voice, “Amen, I say to you, I do not know you. Stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” They were probably as startled as we are today at the abrupt end to the story. At this point, the thinking and the teaching began. As modern Christians, trying to project ourselves into this gathering, and into Jesus’ presence, we clearly would have questions for Him. Jesus may have asked his followers at this point, “what have I taught you? Have I made you think?” He is asking us the same questions today.

The description of wedding preparation and women preparing for the appearance of the groom would have been familiar to people of Jesus’ time. Even the late arrival of the groom occurred with some

regularity since the groom would need to first discuss the dowry with the bride's father. The bridesmaids or young girls would wait with lamps by the groom's house until he arrived. It was presumed that each would bring a lamp to light the path. An extra measure of oil was a sign that the guests took their task seriously. Through the lens of modern Christianity we are likely to be uncomfortable with this parable. It seems that those who remain vigilant and prepared get into the celebration; those who are not prepared are not invited in. They are "not known". Most of us are probably not comfortable with leaving the five unprepared virgins outside. We feel drawn to help them, since it was their intention to greet the Lord. At least, we may be thinking, they brought a lamp! Certainly, it was not Jesus' intent to tell his followers that if one prepares too late, or not enough, that one is lost. We all travel the path to salvation at different rates. Some of us need much more time and help to negotiate the path than others. Several thoughts come to mind as morals of this story. Good intentions alone are not adequate; be contemplatives, but be contemplatives in action; do not be merely pious, but rather, act on your beliefs. Be prepared and help others to prepare, for we really do not know the day or the hour. Be vigilant at all times and pray.

Tom Quinn-Creighton University School of Medicine