

November 8th 2020

Jos 24:1-3a, 14-25; Mt 25:1-13

Proud they stood there in the entrance hall, their eyes fixed on the same person. Their robes fancy and colourful. They were a bubble of 5 in a group of 16 people. They didn't wear masks and the distance they kept would probably not be approved by health officials. There they stood. There were other people. Some paired as couples, some individuals, and another bubble of 5.

Suddenly the earth started shaking heavier and heavier. After half a minute cracks started to appear in the walls, houses started to collapse. People screamed and started running around. But not this group of 16 people. They stood fixed in the entrance hall until, suddenly, the first of the 5 towers collapsed and the heavy sand stones came crushing through the ceiling. The whole entrance hall was destroyed. Only 4 of the 16 were still standing. The others were buried under the stones.

And these 4 are still standing and have survived the last 700 years since this horrible earthquake which hit Basel in 1356. Nearly the whole city was destroyed and also Basel Cathedral suffered greatly. All 5 towers collapsed and destroyed big parts of the sanctuary. But 4 of the 16 stone figures in the entrance hall survived.

Buried under the stones were the 5 wise bridesmaids who were standing proud on their pedestals with their eyes fixed on Christ. Buried were four of the 5 foolish bridesmaids who looked sad at their empty oil lamps and buried was also Christ.

The statues that survived were Emperor Henry II and his wife Cunigunde who had built the Cathedral in 1019 and another man and a woman. The man stands very relaxed with a smile, snipping his fingers and the woman, one of the 5 foolish

bridesmaids is dancing for him, with one hand opening her dress and stripping for him.

If you take a closer look, you will find out that he, the man, has worms, frogs and snakes on his back and fire under his bottom. He is the devil and she has fallen into his spell.

So these survived and are now the four figures right and left of the main entrance greeting the visitors to Basel Cathedral, while Christ and the five wise bridesmaids are gone and

Luckily, another entrance on the North side survived completely and we find another depiction of this parable from our Gospel today there, too.

There was a wedding in town. A wedding in Middle Eastern culture and in so many other cultures can be the event of the year in a small village. Everyone would be involved, everyone would prepare, everyone would look forward to it.

Jesus tells the funny story that there was supposed to be a wedding but the bridegroom didn't come. They waited and waited, but no sign of him. It was getting late and 5 of the ten women started preparing lamps so that they'd be ready once the bridegroom came. The other 5 said, once the bridegroom comes into sight there will still be time. The hours pass, it gets dark and still no sign. Suddenly, someone calls, there he is. Yeah, he hadn't changed his mind. There he is. More and more calls, people start to move, chaos, everyone gets out. The 5 women who had prepared their oil lamps take them and walk over, the others start searching for their oil until they realize that they have to buy new oil. By the time they have their lamps lit, the party is at its pinnacle and when they try to get in, the door is closed. Too late, not ready, not prepared.

When I took tourist groups around and through the Cathedral and we stopped in front of this beautiful nearly 1000 year old art work in stone, they listened to this story and looked amused and puzzled. Probably thinking, o these Christians. What on earth does this story tell us today?

The scepticism usually increased when I pointed out that the whole gate is pointing to the Last Judgement with two angels on the right and left blowing the trumpets and announcing Christ, the Judge of all, and little boxes depicted on the very top of the gate with people coming out naked and putting socks on: the dead coming out of their tombs.

The message of the gate, the message of our Gospel story today: Be ready!

The stone masons gave us hints what it could mean to be ready, they put the four evangelists right and left of that entrance. Live according to Scripture, be a disciple of Christ. And they put 6 beautiful small scenes around the evangelists always depicting a woman (her name is misericordia = lat. Mercy) doing one of the works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, dressing the naked, tending the sick, visiting prisoners, welcoming the homeless. There you have it.

A very simple way to summarize how one can be ready for the day when we have to look back to our lives and give records of our doings.

Usually, that didn't fully convince my tourist groups for whom the refreshments were already waiting on the Cathedral terrace overlooking the river Rhine.

What does it mean to be ready for the day when Christ will come again to finish what he has begun? That day which will come suddenly and unexpectedly like the earthquake in Basel in 1356.

Well, there is this kind of readiness we promise ourselves to take care of first thing in the morning after we get home from a funeral. Confronted with our own mortality, we want to set our priorities right. We don't want to die and hear someone say, O she saved all her life to spend it in her retirement and now she died... Or: He never had time for his children because of his career.

For this kind of readiness, the Gospel has the message: Imagine you died tomorrow, what would you regret? Change it now!

There are other kinds of being ready. When do you start to fight an addiction? Today or tomorrow or always the next day? When do you start working on healing a broken relationship? When do you stop activities that hurt your body or your soul?

What would you want to bring in order and change before it is too late?

This time in the Church year, in the season of fall when nature seems to die, the tradition of the Church confronts us with our own mortality and with our responsibility for our life which has been entrusted to us. It is the time when we look back to what lies behind and take time to evaluate and it is the time when we look ahead and reflect on the question how we want to use the time which is still out there for us to use and to shape. Will we use it in a way that when the day comes and Christ will stand next to us and we'll look back onto our lives together, we will be happy with what we see or will we wait to start changing what needs to be changed until it is too late?

Even when in this life the ones who dance with the devil seem to survive and win and the righteous get hurt and suffer, let's keep our eyes fixed on Christ also when the foundations of the earth seem to shake at the moment. Let's keep our eyes fixed on Christ who promises the crown of victory to those who remain true to him and who promises his infinite mercy to all who try their best.

- The Rev. André Stephany