

## READINESS

### *Sermon for Pentecost 23A- Mt 25:1-13*

LPC, 11/12/17

One of my functions in the Episcopal Diocese of West Virginia, besides being your priest, is chair of the Board of Examining Chaplains. Church canon, that is, church law, requires that before an applicant can be ordained to the diaconate or priesthood, he or she must prove competence in several specified areas, such as Christian theology, Church history, and Scripture studies.

In this Diocese, that means that the Board of Examining Chaplains creates an exam, administers it to the applicant, and then interviews the applicant. Then we make a recommendation to the Bishop, stating our impression of the applicant's competence in the canonical areas.

One of the challenges of this truly exciting work is that academic competence is not primarily what we are looking for. Academic competence is merely the easiest thing to assess by written exam. Usually the interview is much more telling for us than the written exam. This is because rather than proof of didactic learning, we are really looking for what we call "priestly formation." What we want to know is not so much, "does this person *know* enough to be a priest?" which measures the intellect, but "is this person *ready* to be a priest?" which involves so very much more.

Knowledge and accomplishment are only a part of what it takes to be a priest. One thing every seminary graduate can tell you is that seminary teaches only a smidgen of what you need to be a priest. You have to know how to be a leader in the church when 9-11 happens, or when two of the prominent families in your parish are quarrelling, or what kind of funeral is appropriate for a notorious atheist, or what to do when a child throws a plastic dinosaur through the nursery window. You have to be able to think theologically and liturgically about absolutely everything. And your heart needs to be in the right place.

Regularly the Board of Examining Chaplains, along with the Bishop and the Commission on Ministry, has to deal with an applicant who is frustrated at not swimming through the requirements of being a postulant to the priesthood. This is the person who says things like, "How can you hold up my ordination? I have fulfilled all the requirements. I have done everything you asked. Why aren't you holding up your end of the bargain?"

This attitude fails to take into account that priesthood is not something one achieves. It is something one is made. And, as the ordination service makes clear, God is the one who does the making. The bishop places his or her hands on the ordinand, but it is not this action that makes the priest. In the words of ordination, which you may find on page 533 of the Book of Common Prayer, the bishop prays to God, saying, "Make her (or him) a priest in your church." God makes the priest.

Now, because God is God, God could spontaneously create a priest out of someone who has shown no previous aptitude or inclination (*\*Bing! You're a priest!\**) but that is not how it usually happens. Most people these days do not dare enter the ordination process unless there has been abundant evidence that God has already been at work, making the person into a priest,

bestowing on the person talents and inclinations and interests and aptitudes that are supportive of being a priest.

Through all of this, the person of course is not passive. The person cooperates with God's priest-making, by studying, praying and ministering. For priestly formation to happen, what usually happens is that God invites, and possibly prods, and the person responds.

In a way, it's unfortunate that I'm using the example of priestly formation, because I could be giving the impression that priesthood is the only ministry to which these observations apply. I am speaking of priesthood because that is what I know, but the same is true of any vocation.

If you are a mechanic, you know that memorizing the owner's manual does not make you a mechanic. Most mechanics begin with some kind of aptitude for working with machinery, and become mechanics by working on machines. Book-learning is part of it, surely, but becoming a mechanic does not happen without literally getting your hands dirty. Cognitive competence (in other words, what you know) does not a mechanic make. And nobody says, "Bing! You're a mechanic!" and make it so.

If you are a teacher, and you've ever had a student teacher fresh out of school, you're grateful for the youthful energy and the fresh awareness of the most up-to-date pedagogical theory, but you often find the person needs some seasoning. Being a teacher is not just completing a checklist. To be a teacher you have to teach. And the best teachers continue to learn how to be teachers all their careers. They don't say, "OK, I checked that off in teacher's college," and consider their formation complete.

I ask you to keep this in mind as I interpret this parable about the wise and foolish bridesmaids. It doesn't do to get fixated on the lamp-oil, or even on the relative wisdom of foolishness of the bridesmaids. This is one of many parables about readiness. We're going to hear a lot more on this topic as we approach Advent, the season of preparation for the coming of Jesus at Christmas.

Advent is about readiness, but, as Jesus makes clear, readiness to receive God must be a constant in the life of Jesus' followers, all year long, all a Christian's life long. "Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Now some Christians interpret this as a prescription for having a sort of bomb shelter, really or figuratively speaking, with blankets and canned goods in the event of the apocalypse or the Rapture, or whatever they call it. I think that may be falling into the checklist trap: of equating readiness with a list of milestones accomplished. True readiness for God is more like priestly formation, or mechanic formation, or teacher formation: something for which one has God-given aptitude, but which one spends one's life cultivating, nurturing, always seeking, always hoping to be the best priest, or mechanic or teacher one can be.

Readiness is what Christ calls us to. And readiness is not about qualifications checked off, but about continuous, eager, life-long formation. God, make us Christians in your church, today and every day.