

I don't know why, but it seems like the concept of Karma plays a big role in the lives of people these days. When someone hurts us, or does something that is unspeakably horrible, we typically try to be the bigger person and turn the other cheek as Jesus encourages us to do in Scripture. But, if we are honest with ourselves, we often do so with the hope that somehow, in some way, that person who caused us pain or did something evil, will get theirs! We say things like, karma will catch up to them. Which begs the question, do we really see God as a Cosmic Cop eager to catch people in all their misplayed good intentions, bad habits, failed initiatives, and compromising acts, so he can throw the book at them?

Granted, there seems to be some biblical evidence for this view — from the mouth of Jesus himself, no less. Several times, he warns that failure to toe the line may result in one being cast into outer darkness where there's weeping, wailing and a gnashing of teeth. It's a form, perhaps, of frontier justice, or an eye-for-an-eye revenge motif, or even a type of unqualified joy. We're happy to see evildoers get punished.

Perhaps that is why we turn to Instagram, YouTube or TikTok to watch "instant karma" dash cam videos. Instant karma occurs when, for example, a car streaks by you at 80 miles per, weaving in and out of traffic. But then, just as you're about to say, "Where's a cop when you need one?" you see the guy getting lit up by an unmarked state trooper he just passed. Instant karma! The driver caught it all on his dash cam. You can hear him shout, "Yes!" You can feel the adrenaline of fresh sadism pumping through his veins.

For a majority of people in this world, the concept of Karma is kind of cool. But instant karma is even cooler. And yet, no one ever wants to be on the receiving end. No one likes to be publicly embarrassed. You get pulled over by a police officer after you've been speeding and driving recklessly, and you feel like the drivers passing you are laughing at you. It's often an embarrassing situation, and is

not fun, not fun at all! Ok, with that being the case *what can we do to avoid being the victim of instant karma?*

This brings us to Jesus' little story told in today's gospel reading and our takeaway for today: What can one do to avoid being embarrassed like the five bridesmaids whose lamps ran out of oil, or — to use a modern metaphor — whose smartphone batteries were deader than disco? Well, to fully understand the power of the Lord's parable, it's necessary to review how Matthew arranges Jesus' red-letter words of the two previous chapters: 23 and 24.

Chapter 23 is full of stinging denunciations against the religious leaders of his day who “do not practice what they preach.” “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” “Woe to you, blind guides ... you blind fools!” “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!”

You can practically picture Jesus (exhausted by his rebuking and scolding) stopping to catch his breath, perhaps sitting on a stone wall on the Mount of Olives, and sighing, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate.”

Then, Matthew lets us in on more gloom and doom. Jesus tells everyone who will listen that the temple will be reduced to rubble. He starts muttering about signs of the end of the world. He says that false prophets will arise, persecution will be rampant and that friends will betray one another. Things will be so bad that the public will head for the hills wishing they'd never been born.

Then there will be portents in the sky. Solar and lunar eclipses will only be part of it. There will be amazing and horrifying meteor showers and “the powers of heaven will be shaken.” And in that moment ... in that very moment, human

destiny will be decided. For “all the tribes of the earth will ... see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other”

Now, let’s scroll forward to today’s parable about the 10 women of a bridal party, five of whom were vigilant and ready for every contingency, and five who were incompetent, reckless, and careless, and who were, in terms of our metaphor, victims of instant karma. They were on the receiving end of the humiliation and anguish they richly deserved. They are classic examples of the conditions reviewed by Jesus in the previous two chapters.

It isn’t hard for us to imagine that perhaps there were times when Jesus had trouble with his followers nodding off when, in his opinion, they should’ve had a Red Bull and toughed it out. It almost happened at the site of his Transfiguration in the early days of his ministry: “Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed, they saw his glory.” But other times, they just could not keep up with Jesus. In Gethsemane, hours before Jesus’ crucifixion, Jesus has his besties with him. He goes off to pray — he was nervous about his impending trial and inevitable suffering. “Remain here, and stay awake with me,” he said. But they could not.

In today’s narrative, Jesus concludes the lesson by saying, “Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour!” Keep awake? Really? Can this really be Jesus’ main idea? After all, Jesus himself in his parable declared that *all 10 of the bridesmaids succumbed to sleep!* Their lamps were out. They were Dead to the world. All of them!

Yet, when the groom appears, the trumpets sound, the shouting begins, the *hora* is danced whilst singing “Hava Nagila,” and five of the wedding party are ready — *immediately*. But, as we are most certainly aware, their prior sleepiness is

not the problem. Some had oil for their lamps; others didn't. Some slept with one eye on the alarm clock; others didn't. Some remembered they were on standby alert, on-call status; others didn't. Some were operating at Defcon 1, the highest state of readiness; others were not.

Which begs the question perhaps Jesus' warning to "stay awake" must mean something other than literally, "don't go to sleep." Instead, we must read Jesus' warning as, "Be ready. Be aware. Be in a state of readiness. For example: " A blizzard is coming. In the aftermath of a snowfall of 7 feet, you discover that your neighbors have snow shovels, but you do not. Perhaps you remember the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic? Your neighbors had toilet paper; but you did not. Most car owners have a spare tire in the trunk. "Ah, so do I," you think triumphantly — but you discover it's flat at the moment you need it.

The five slacking bridesmaids in this mornings' parable had one thing to do: *bring plenty of oil*. And although you might say that it isn't as bad as running out of wine, which happened to the host of an actual wedding Jesus attended, running out of lamp oil is not a good thing. That's kind of like having no candles or batteries for our flashlights when the power goes out. Who does that?

Five very foolish members of the wedding party. In fact, after they try to go to the market to fix their mistake when they finally do show up, the doors are closed. The opportunity to party is gone. Their chance to get a seat at the table was lost. Ok, if that is the case, then how can we be ready and awake? It's a good question.

In fact, the apostle Paul had to address the same question, especially in his letters to the church in Thessalonica. Some had taken the idea of being ready with their lamps trimmed and burning so seriously that they'd stopped working altogether and were living in idleness. If you flip over to 2 Thessalonians chapter three you will find Paul's stinging response to those Christians who didn't

understand what it meant to watch and wait. “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat,” he writes. He accuses them of “living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.”

Paul himself answers the question by reminding his readers that “we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not be a burden to any of you.”

For countless years people have wrestled to find an answer to how we can stay alert and be prepared. Especially given the fact that predictions about Christ’s return have been replete with times and dates, and are often fueled by apocalyptic fervor, antisemitism, or charismatic — if not psychotic — seers. Martin of Tours, Gregory of Tours, Pope Innocent III, the painter Botticelli, radical reformer Thomas Müntzer, and many others all claimed to know when the Lord was coming again. Even Martin Luther insisted the return would happen no later than 1600.

Ok, so how then can we maintain a state of readiness? Sometimes it’s so obvious that we can’t see it staring at us. To live in vigilance means that Christians must do the tasks they have been assigned to do, like the 10 bridesmaids. According to Matthew’s gospel, those tasks include: Bearing witness to God’s kingdom by welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and making disciples of all nations in all the world.

It’s all there. In the same chapter no less. Do these four things — actions that could fall under the category of loving one’s neighbor — and you can be assured that when the Lord comes, there will be oil in your lamps. No one will catch you napping. You will not be embarrassed before your Lord or your neighbors. No instant karma for you. Rather, you will hear the bridegroom say, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” And thanks be to God for that! Amen!

