



## Department of Religious Education

Diocese of the Armenian Church of America

630 Second Avenue • New York, NY 10016-4885

a publication for Sunday School teachers

March 1997

### HOLY TUESDAY

On Holy Tuesday evening, which falls this year on March 25, the Armenian Church recalls the apocalyptic parables of Jesus which he shared with his beloved disciples as well as with the Pharisees and Sadducees during his final days. The church lectionary selects an excerpt from the Gospel of Matthew that describes the last days of Jesus' life: his journey to Jerusalem, his angry overturning of the temple tables, his anguish over what had become of the house of prayer. And then his moving homilies, spewed out one after the other in Matthew as if mimicking the urgency of the Lord's last teaching moments. Here we read the parable of the householder and the tenants (Matthew 21:33-41), the parable of the marriage feast (Matthew 22:1-14) where many were called but few chosen, the advice to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's (Matthew 22:15-22), a description of the resurrection of the dead (Matthew 22:23-33), and an instruction in the two great commandments of love (Matthew 22:34-40). He railed against the hypocrisy of the temple officials. Exhausted, he withdrew.

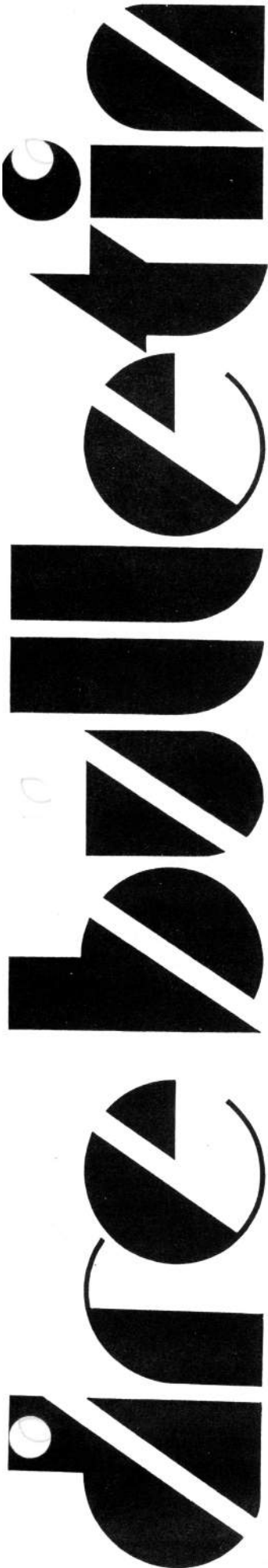


And then he shares the vivid imagery of the time when he will return. For while *Avak Shapat* (Holy Week) points to despair as an era ends, it points beyond to the hope of the Resurrection and the Second Coming.

*Apocalyptic* literature from the Greek for "unveiling" or "revelation" was a potent force in the Jewish world of Christ's earthly life. Emanating from the hopelessness of Palestine over its diminishing trust in the Roman world, it was designed to comfort the Jews and point to an age where God's justice would prevail. Most often these writings were written anonymously but ascribed to a classic Jewish hero. This was the character of the stories Jesus told his disciples.

Among the violent images of darkened suns, falling stars, famines, earthquakes, and cycles of war, is the quiet parable of the ten bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13). Drawn, as so many of Jesus' stories were, from the everyday life of the people of Palestine, the parable centers on a mundane event. A bridegroom is travelling back to his home with the bride he has fetched from hers, so that they might be married in an elaborate and festive ceremony. Ten bridesmaids await the groom but five have made no provisions for lighting their torches should evening fall. Sure enough, the groom is delayed and as the five scramble to find oil in the market, the wedding party begins and the doors are locked against latecomers.

In recent centuries, this parable has been marked in a symbolic ceremony of the Armenian Church, wherein, ten girls draw lots (*vijag*) and bear lit or unlit tapers accordingly, as the Gospel is read.



The Armenian Church intentionally centers the faithful on one of the most important lessons of Holy Week. The earthly mission of our Lord draws to an end but his reign is forever and its fulfillment cannot be forecast. *Watch, for you know neither the day nor the hour* (Matthew 25:13). In the apocalypse-tinged world of first century Jews and Christians, this was real. Is it for us?

It is human to put off for tomorrow what overwhelms us today. Whether it's to lose weight, stop yelling at our kids, become better organized or start that discipline of prayer, charity, writing, exercising, or thinking more of others, anytime but now is good.

The power of the forty days of Lent lies in the effort that will not be delayed, in the pious disciplines that cannot be put off for another day, in the spiritual centering that must be accomplished for the promise of Holy Week to be fulfilled. And yet that too has become a time of vague promises and mental lists.

The parable of the ten bridesmaids is about God's unequivocal demand that we strive for the kingdom of God in the here and now so that, when he himself restores it fully in some unknown time, he will be satisfied with both our effort and its results. For then, all who are ready will be borne away to the splendor of the marriage feast and those still banking on tomorrow will miss their moment of redemption, a single moment based on a lifetime of opportunities.