

23rd Sunday Trinity – Year A

We are in the last few weeks of the current liturgical year. At the beginning of December, we will start a new liturgical year with the season of Advent. Therefore during these last few weeks, the scriptures tend to focus on the End times and the second coming of the Lord. The readings this Sunday find some unity around the theme of the right attitude to adopt towards the future and the coming of the Lord. Matthew's Gospel devotes a long section to this theme, culminating in the three parables that make up chapter 25. Today's Gospel, Matt 25:1-13, features the first of these parables, the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids (literally, "virgins").

As it appears in the Gospel, the story seems to presuppose a wedding custom whereby unmarried young women, who have been waiting with the bride at her family's house, go out to meet the bridegroom when he arrives to take her to his own house. When his arrival is announced, they go out to meet him with lamps and escort the couple back to his house, where the marriage feast has been prepared and the guests are waiting for their entry.

Being excluded from a wedding feast was a real tragedy for young virgins during this time. There were no singles groups or speed dating opportunities; no office or job where one could meet young single men, let

alone any online dating apps of today! A wedding was one of the few chances for a young girl to meet someone. Being left out of a wedding diminished the chances of marrying and securing a life ahead. We need to understand this cultural context to realize the weight of what Jesus is trying to say. There were serious consequences in missing out on a wedding feast; particularly for young girls, but even more serious consequences in missing out on 'The Wedding Banquet' which is the Kingdom of God at the end of time.

So we are hearing again the familiar imagery of the messianic banquet or wedding feast to which all are invited. However, only those who live with an attitude of openness and readiness will come into the great banquet hall of the eternal bridegroom. Matthew introduces the themes of delay and the need to be ready for the second coming of Christ. Similar to us, Matthew's community was living in the 'in-between' times. While Christ's victory over death and resurrection has begun a new phase in history it is not yet complete. Completion would only come with his return in Glory. So we are invited to live in the present with an eye to the future. We cannot just focus on the here and the now nor can we ignore the sufferings and the responsibilities of the present and set our hearts only on heaven; we are to find a good balance.

The centre of this parable is a small oil crisis in the Middle East. Oil is a vital part of human life then and now. Now we use it in our cars, in cooking, in medicine, in painting, and for lamplight. The Church uses three types of oil in

four of her sacraments: The oil of the Catechumens, the oil of Chrism, and the oil of the sick. These oils are used in Baptisms, Confirmation, Holy Orders, and the Sacrament of the Sick. These sacred oils represent the various gifts of God, the strengthening, healing, and enlightening power of the Holy Spirit.

The lamp oil in the parable represents those resources we need to meet the challenge of being ready for the coming of the Lord; our actions, our faith, our service to others, our prayer life, and how much we truly love. How are our oil levels at the moment? How are the oil reserves going? Are we running out of oil to keep our light shining and our lamps burning? If we are foolish we will not worry about our oil levels and think the Lord will delay or he will never come again altogether. Many who have lost the oil of faith and are manipulated by secular culture, live only for this world as if there is nothing to come or there is anything to look forward to. If we are not vigilant we too can easily run out of oil and empty our souls of faith and hope.

On the other hand, the wise bridesmaids did what was expected of them, in being prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom. They had patience and they were there for the long haul and not just a quick joy ride. They were prepared and had extra oils to use if necessary. Their wisdom is not extraordinary but practical – after all, what they have done is take some extra oil. There is a tremendous blessing in doing ordinary with patience, perseverance, and sensitivity, in doing the sane and sensible thing, and in acting with common

sense and prudence. *The fourteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart summed up it perfectly when he said: "Wisdom consists in doing the next thing you have to do, doing it with your whole heart, and finding delight in doing it."*

There are some things we can't borrow from others in life. This is the point of the wise not lending any oil to the foolish, not that they were selfish or greedy. We can't borrow someone else's faith, someone else's grace, someone else's spiritual convictions. We are responsible before God for our spiritual condition, and what we have done with the oil given us. We can blame the world for many things but not for the state of our soul before God; not for our oil levels. That is up to us. Thus the final warning in the parable is to be prepared and stay awake since we do not know the day or the hour.

Regarding Paul's clarification to the Thessalonians in the Second Reading, it is important to point out that his description of the events of the end does not have to be taken literally (as in the "Rapture" foreseen by some Christian sects). It offers a symbolic portrayal of the truth that believers who have already died, no less than the living, will share the final triumph of the risen Lord.

November is a time dedicated to thinking about death, not to be morbid but to be wise and to focus on what is important in our lives. We prepare for eternity by how we live. A traditional retreat reflection years ago was to

imagine ourselves writing our own obituary. What would we say about our accomplishments and loyalties? To whom were we truly faithful? How carefully did we use the gifts given to us? Once we have taken death seriously with the light of faith, we can live our lives in a truly authentic way.

November leads to Advent in a few weeks which is a time to prepare for the coming of Christ to us at Christmas. All this reflection about being ready for the coming of the Lord and the end times can be seen in one simple well-known story. A Holy Old Monk was sweeping up the fallen leaves in the Monastery garden when a visitor asked him: “What would you do, brother, if you knew you were to die in ten minutes.” The old monk replied: “I’d carry on sweeping”. If our oil levels are good, we too can carry on sweeping even if the end is 10 minutes away.