

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

It's the parable of the ten virgins. Five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They had gone to the house of the bridegroom to celebrate his wedding, but he was delayed in returning. This is what distinguished the wise virgins from the foolish: the wise had oil in their lamps to last through the wait, the foolish had none.

On the outset, it seems a silly example. Who goes out into the night, not expecting to be back home soon, without oil for their lamps? That's like hopping onto the interstate for a long road trip with your gas tank near empty. That's like trying to use your computer, tablet, or phone to watch a movie with almost no charge left on your battery. That's like trying to do your day's work without having eaten breakfast and without eating lunch—on an empty stomach. Well, for the sake of what Jesus was trying to teach, that's exactly what five of the virgins did. They went to wait for the bridegroom to return without bringing enough oil for their lamps. No one could be that foolish, right?

To understand what Jesus is teaching, you might need a little context. A marriage in the ancient world happened much differently than today. These days, a man asks a woman to marry him (or sometimes the other way around), she says, "Yes," and they begin planning. Ideally, they spend much time together, but not all of the time, so as not to defile the marriage bed. They meet with their pastor, go through some instruction, then the day comes, and they are married. On that night, the husband and wife move in together and begin their life together.

Things were slightly different in the ancient world. For one thing, marriages were often arranged by parents. This arrangement was binding, and the couple was considered married once the arrangement was finalized. This is what you read of as betrothal—the estate Joseph and Mary were in as Jesus was born—though it's possible in this case that Joseph did the arranging with Mary's parents. This betrothal, however, wasn't a full-fledged marriage; the couple didn't live together as husband and wife until the wedding day, which might have been determined as the time by which the bridegroom had prepared the house for he and his bride to live in, not on a day that he and his bride had arranged with their pastor, the reception hall, photographer, baker, and caterer.

On that day, the bridegroom would go to his bride's house, where she would come out to meet him. They would be married and then they and all who attended would make their way to the bridegroom's house. This journey home was hardly ever straightforward, especially if this home was in the next town or village. Bridges could be washed out. Roads could be blocked for one reason or another. A war or battle might have broken out along the way between two rival factions. Delays in the bridegroom's return with his bride were the norm. But, once they were there, the wedding feast would commence.

That's the picture Jesus paints in today's text. The town is preparing to receive the bridegroom and his bride, but he is delayed. Five of the ten virgins were prepared for the delay, as that was the norm. The other five foolishly weren't prepared.

So, what does this mean?

Well, in the context of the early Church, it was expected that Jesus would return within the lifetime of Her members. Those who were alive at the time and could have witnessed Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension were anticipating seeing His return as well. But, the bridegroom was delayed in returning.

Jesus was warning His hearers not to be foolish in their expectation of His return. As He said, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming." And elsewhere He said, "[O]f that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only." (Matthew 24:36)

The idea of a quick return lasted in the early Church, even past the first generation. As St. Paul was writing the Thessalonians, encouraging them to remain vigilant, he reiterates Jesus.

For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a

thief in the night. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. (1 Thessalonians 5:2, 4-6)

There, the Apostle had to combat the idea of idleness as the Thessalonian Christians waited for the coming of the Christ. The idea was that if Jesus was going to be coming back soon, what point was there in doing anything?

Through the ages, the idea of an immanent return faded. It became a question, one that was famously posed once to Martin Luther. What if you knew that Jesus was returning tomorrow? "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree." Today, some who call themselves Christian no longer expect the return of Christ—now there's a definition of foolish if I ever heard one!

So, how does the parable play out? Well, for many, the focus is on the oil. It is the oil which differentiates the wise virgins from the foolish ones. So it goes, then, that the bridegroom is Jesus and the virgins represent the church. Yeah, a little weird given the context of ancient marriages, but for the purposes of Jesus' parable, it works. For the purposes of the Church and the Last Day, it also works.

The virgins are the Bride of Christ. All ten of them represent the Church, even though when he's at the banquet and they return, the bridegroom tells the five foolish virgins that he doesn't know them. So, if all of the virgins represent the Church, then the focus has to be on the oil.

The oil then, some say, is faith. The foolish virgins "ran out of faith" as they awaited the return of Jesus and were told to go buy some at the market. It sounds nice. It sounds logical. But I'm not sure it works quite right. To say that faith is something the virgins can produce, keep, or procure just doesn't fit with the rest of Jesus' teaching. Faith is the gift of God, and it relies solely on the grace of God, as St. Paul wrote. (cf. Ephesians 2:8-9) So, when the foolish virgins run out of oil and are told to go to the market to get more, to equate oil with faith doesn't really work.

Perhaps the flame in the lamps would better represent faith. It is fed by the oil and burns so long as there is oil present. If the oil is neglected, then the flame flickers out.

In that case, the oil could represent the teachings of Jesus—His doctrine. Equating the oil to doctrine fits the narrative of the parable better, too. So long as the teachings of Jesus are treasured and kept, the flame does not go out. In the context of the parable, the foolish virgins have no oil because they did not heed the word that the bridegroom's return is very likely to be delayed. It was the wisdom of the ages in the ancient world; it translates to the life of the church in that a delay should be expected because no one knows the day of Jesus' return. The word of God teaches you that they day will come like a thief in the night, unexpectedly, so be prepared for it.

So, when they were encouraged to go buy more oil, they were encouraged to go to that place where the doctrine of Jesus is given. They were told to go to that place where the Gospel is preached in it's purity and the Holy Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. This is the way oil for your lamps is procured. It is in the place that Jesus say He is for you—in church. For the five foolish virgins, however, it was too late. Churches were empty because the people were at the banquet. For the foolish, there is no more preparation to be had, their flame will have flickered out, and Jesus does not know them.

So, you are prepared by being in the Word of God. Apart from the teaching that Christ's return will be unexpected, there's also great comfort in Christ's doctrine as the Church waits and waits and waits. For one thing, in the Word is the promise of salvation for all who have received faith. As the lamp burns, salvation is guaranteed! For another, there is the promise of the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus Christ in Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and the Lord's Supper. For another, there is the promise that while you wait, Jesus is with you always, even to the end of the age. (cf. Matthew 28:20) All the while, there is the promise that Jesus will return, because He is not slack concerning His promises. (cf. 2 Peter 3:9)

If the doctrine of Jesus is neglected, then all kinds of false ideas can emerge. You may begin to expect to see Jesus' return, which may very well happen, but you have no guarantee of seeing it in your

lifetime. You may fall victim to the many false prophets out there claiming to know the day and time of the end of the age. You may begin to think that since Jesus will be back soon, you don't have to do anything. Or, you may become so complacent in God's tarrying, that you no longer expect Jesus to return. These are all things that the Scriptures teach against, and things that, with oil in your lamps, you should know better than to believe. They are all a neglect of the oil of God's doctrine, which will inevitably lead to a loss of faith.

The faith you have been given, however, expectantly waits for Jesus to return. He is your Bridegroom who will return to bring you to His house, which is your house. Even before the foundation of the world, you were betrothed to God your Creator. (cf. Ephesians 1:4) By God's grace, you have been sealed to Him as a part of His Bridegroom. However, it is sin which not-so-secretly divorces you from Him, but there is a remedy for that. Jesus has come and is married to His Bride at the cross. There, as you have heard Him speak, He leaves His Father and mother and is joined to His Bride:

- "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'" (Mark 15:34)
- "He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!'" (John 19:26-27)

Then, He breathed His last, and died. His death is your life—for as a faithful Bridegroom, He gave up His life for His Bride. The life He has given you, He gives you for His sake for eternity. He was buried and rose again, and so sealed to you the promise of eternal life. God is faithful, He keeps His promise, and He has promised you life eternal in His name. He gave His life as a guarantee of that. To Jesus, you are part of that spotless Bride, the Church, made so by the shedding of His own blood. (Ephesians 5:25-27)

Forty days after the Resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven. This was His going away from which He promised to return. It's been nearly 2000 years, and the virgins, the Bride of Christ, still wait. She waits confident in the promise that He has made to return. And as a faithful Bridegroom, He has gone to prepare the house for His bride.

Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.
(John 14:1-3)

Now, the threat to you is to wait for the second coming of Jesus without oil in your lamps. The threat comes from many sides, as I have mentioned. As Jesus and St. Paul have warned and encouraged, even St. Peter as we heard last week—"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10)—do not grow weary of the wait for Jesus' return. He will return at some unknown time, you can expect that, and the main three words in that is **Jesus will return**.

As a guard against complacency and an oil-less wait, Jesus urges you to His Word and Supper. By the working of the Holy Spirit, you are brought here again and again to hear the Word of God, to receive the forgiveness of sins, and to be prepared for His coming again, as the Bridegroom comes to take His Bride to the place He has prepared for Her—that Jesus has prepared for you. Here, you receive Jesus as He comes to you in His means, and you are reminded that Jesus is gone to prepare a place for you and the rest of His Bride, and that **He will return**.

Dear members of the Bride of Christ, your Lord tarries, but as a time to prepare a place for you in eternity. That place is being prepared, and **Jesus will return**. You have heard His promise on that. You hear it time and again in this place as Jesus' doctrine is taught to you, spoken into you, and refills your lamps, strengthening your faith. As Jesus prepares that place, He still comes among you as a faithful Bridegroom and prepares you for that place, again and again, in your hearing of the Word and the receiving of the Sacraments. For Jesus, your Bridegroom is in these means for you, in order to forgive you for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.