

## 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

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| <i>First Reading</i>      | Wisdom 6:12-16   |
| <i>Response</i>           | My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God.                                     |
| <i>Psalm</i>              | Psalm 63:2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8  |
| <i>Second Reading</i>     | 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18  |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | Stay awake and be ready!<br>For you do not know on what day your Lord will come. |
| <i>Gospel</i>             | Matthew 25:1-13  |

For the 32nd week in Ordinary Time, we get another one of Matthew's special parables. These are referred to by scholars as special matthian passages, because they're only found in the Gospel of Matthew, and this is the case with the famous parable of the ten virgins — sometimes called the parable of the five foolish virgins and the five wise virgins. It's only found in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 25:1-13. So let's read the Gospel and then we will try to unpack it and connect it with the Old Testament and the Psalm. Jesus said these words:

Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he replied, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.'

Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, so what's the meaning of this parable of Jesus about the ten virgins? This is another example from Matthew's Gospel of just how Jewish the Gospel really is. Jesus here is clearly presupposing that his audience is familiar with Jewish wedding customs, and a lot of these are the cultural background of the parable. So just a few points about an ancient Jewish wedding. First of all, there were three basic elements to a first century Jewish wedding. We don't have a ton of information about it, but we do know some basics. First, the marriage would begin with the betrothal. So a man and a woman would be betrothed, they would exchange vows, and they would legally become husband and wife; but they didn't actually live together or consummate the marriage until they had had time for the bridegroom, the husband, to build a home, prepare a home for the bride, and also for the celebration of the great wedding feast. And that wedding feast would usually be seven days long. It would be seven days of feasting and joy, with the gathering of the townspeople and the family together to celebrate. During that seven-day feast they would have one particular night of the feast, the night of consummation, where the bridegroom and the bride would be carried in procession into the bridegroom's home, into what was called the *chuppah*, the wedding chamber, where they would consummate the marriage. It was part of that week-long wedding feast.

So what Jesus is describing here in this parable is the entourage of virgins who would be, in a sense, the first century Jewish equivalent of bridesmaids today. So if you think about a wedding today, you have the groomsmen (those were called sons of the bride chamber), the friends and the family, the men who were close to the bridegroom; and then you would also have the maids, the virgins, the bridesmaids, who would be part of the wedding procession. That was the role that they played. Just like today in a wedding, even the term bridesmaids — why do we call them that? — comes from the English word maiden, which means a virgin. It means an unmarried woman. And so the same thing here is true of *parthénos* in the Greek. These ten virgins are ten maidens, ten maids, ten bridesmaids, who

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

were supposed to be ready for the procession of the bridegroom into the home, and into in this case it would appear to be an indoor wedding feast that would be celebrated on the night of the wedding. Frequently the procession would take place at night and they'd have torches, which are called lamps here, to light the way. It would be a kind of festive occasion.

So what Jesus is saying is we have a situation where on that night of the great feast and of the wedding procession, you have these ten bridesmaids, five of whom were foolish and five are wise. And the difference between the two is that the foolish ones didn't have any oil for their lamps, or in this case it might be their torches. You would take a torch and wrap it around with a cloth drenched in oil in order to burn it. So five have oil and five of them don't. And what happens is the procession is delayed. The bridegroom is supposed to come in procession into the house but he's delayed. So while they're waiting for the bridegroom to come they fall asleep and he doesn't get there until midnight. In other words, in the middle of the night he finally shows up, which is pretty late for a wedding procession, and everyone says "Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." So all the bridesmaids get up, but the problem is the five foolish ones are worried about their lamps going out so they ask the wise ones to give them some of the oil.

And as I have told you before here, whenever you encounter a parable of Jesus, there's almost always a twist, and this one has a couple of twists. By twists I mean an unexpected element where the characters in the story do something that you wouldn't ordinarily expect them to do. So in this case, the first twist is that the five wise bridesmaids, virgins, refuse to give any oil. This is kind of weird because these processions wouldn't go on for miles. You get the sense actually that they are not very far from the wedding feast, and so the bridesmaids say no, we are not going to give you any of our oil, go and buy some for yourself. Okay, well that just doesn't make any sense, because there are not going to be shops open at midnight. This isn't like the 21st century where you have a 24-hour Walmart that you can just go in at anytime of the day and purchase something. The bridesmaids would not be able to go and purchase oil in the middle of the night, so that is your first clue here that this is not an ordinary wedding and this is not an ordinary bridegroom, and it's not really about oil and lamps. The lamps and the virgins and the oil symbolize something more. There's a spiritual signification to this. So that is the first twist to the parable.

A second twist happens when after this the bridegroom comes and the wise virgins are able to light their torches, go in procession, and enter into the wedding feast. But then the five foolish ones actually go out and get some oil, but by the time they get back the door to the wedding feast has already been shut. So they knock on the door and say “Lord, lord, open to us.” This is another little clue because the word there is *kýrios*, which can be used for master, but it's also the name for the Lord, the Lord God, or Jesus as the Lord, the son of God. So they say Lord, open to us. Now what does he do? He comes and he opens and says “I do not know you” and shuts the door in their face effectively. Okay, here is your second twist. If this were an ordinary wedding...let's imagine just for the sake of argument that some of the bridesmaids weren't adequately prepared for the wedding. They didn't have oil for their lamps and they had actually got some and they were able to light their lamps finally. Would the groom actually shut the door in their faces if they were the friends of his bride, if they were the family members of his bride? No, no groom is going to treat the bridesmaids like this. He would welcome them in. They would be late, but it wouldn't be the end the world. But in this case, not only does the bridegroom refuse to let them in, he says something which is completely inconceivable: “I do not know you”; which doesn't make any sense in an ordinary wedding because just like today, the groomsmen and the bridesmaids are all ordinarily chosen from close friends or family members of the groom or the bride. That is just a standard practice and it goes back to ancient times.

So what's going on here? What kind of a bridegroom does this? What kind of bridesmaids do this? Well, Jesus is not talking about an ordinary wedding. He's talking about the kingdom of God. He is talking about the kingdom of Heaven. We've seen over and over again in Matthew's Gospel that he will compare the kingdom of Heaven to a wedding or a wedding feast or a royal wedding, like the king's son, and that's the imagery here. This is really about the kingdom of Heaven, and you can see this in the final line. In many of Jesus' parables — I don't know if I have said this before — it's important to highlight that there is what's called a *nimshal*. The *nimshal* is a Hebrew word for an explanation of the parable that drives home the main point. Sometimes a *nimshal* will be longer, like in the parable of the sower where Jesus explains all the elements; other times the *nimshal* will be very short, it will just be a one-liner.

In this case it is very short. What's the *nimshal*? What's the point of the parable? "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Now I know what Jesus is talking about. This parable of the kingdom of Heaven is really about the final judgment. It's about the coming of Christ, the second coming of Christ at the end of time, with the imagery here being Christ as the divine bridegroom, the bridegroom Messiah, who appears to be delayed but will come at some point to inaugurate the everlasting wedding feast of the kingdom of Heaven. And when he comes, we don't know when it is going to be, so we need to be ready. So the bridesmaids, the ten virgins in this case, represent the Church in two different states: those who are prepared for the second coming of Christ, these will be like the five wise virgins who had oil for their lamps, or those who are unprepared for the second coming of Christ, like the five foolish virgins who don't have any oil in their lamps in order to greet the bridegroom properly. Those who are prepared for the second coming are going to be brought in to the great wedding feast of the Lamb, as Revelation 19 will describe the kingdom of heaven. Those who are unprepared for the coming of Christ at the final judgment will be excluded from the everlasting kingdom of God, and this is of course another figure for what later goes on to be called the punishments of hell. The Catechism is very clear about this. The chief suffering, the chief pain of what we call hell, is eternal separation from God. We see that figured here with the fact that the bridegroom is separating these five foolish virgins and telling them I never knew you. I don't know you. I don't have a relationship with you.

If you have any doubts about that, you can actually look back in Matthew 7. Jesus uses the same language earlier at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. At the very end of the sermon he says, in verse 21:

Not every one who says to me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers."

So notice the two parallels there with the parable of the virgins. "Lord, lord," which is what they say, "open the door to us." And then Jesus' response is "I never

knew you.” I think this is really important for us to remember because it shows us two things. First, the fundamental importance of a personal relationship with Christ. I know that sometimes that can sound cliché, it can even sound like it's not a Catholic way of approaching things because many Protestant Christians will say “do you have a personal relationship with Christ?” But there's a real important truth in that expression that you see here in biblical language when Jesus says I need to know you. In other words, I need to have a relationship with you if you're going to come into the joy of the kingdom of Heaven. And that relationship is expressed in Matthew 7, Jesus says, through doing the will of God. That is how we foster and cultivate a relationship with him, by doing his will. And those who don't do the will of the Father in heaven, who might even perform lots of great deeds or things that are external shows — like didn't we prophesy in your name or cast out demons in your name — but if we don't know Jesus, it is not going to cut it, because the foundation is that relationship with Jesus Christ. To be sure, works are important, we have to do the will of God, but we have to do the will of God through his grace in a relationship with him, where we know him as savior and bridegroom. And these five foolish virgins have obviously not carried that out. They have fallen away. So that is kind of the basic meaning of the parable in a first century Jewish context.

In this case, if we go back to the Old Testament reading for today, the first reading is another one of these examples of a book of the Catholic Old Testament. It is not in the Protestant Bible. This is called the book of Wisdom or the Wisdom of Solomon. The reading for today, the first reading is from Wisdom 6:12-16, and I have to confess that when I first read this, this is one of those times where it's really not clear right off the bat how the Old Testament reading goes with the New Testament reading. But I will read it to you and then I'll try to show you what I think is the connection, why the Church linked these two readings together. So it says this in Wisdom 6:12-16:

Wisdom is radiant and unfading,  
and she is easily discerned by those who love her,  
and is found by those who seek her.  
She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her.  
He who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty,  
for he will find her sitting at his gates.

To fix one's thought on her is perfect understanding,  
and he who is vigilant on her account will  
soon be free from care,  
because she goes about seeking those worthy of her,  
and she graciously appears to them in their paths,  
and meets them in every thought.

Okay, what is that about? In the Old Testament you frequently have a personification of Wisdom as a lady. The Greek word here is actually *Sophia*. We get the word philosophy from that, the love of wisdom. We also get the female name Sophia from that Greek word. So if you meet a woman or a young girl with the name Sophia, her name means wisdom, lady wisdom to be precise. So what the Wisdom of Solomon is basically describing is it is personifying Wisdom as a woman and is saying that if you want to find her you have to seek her, you have to pursue her, using two images here. He who rises early to seek her is not going to have any difficulty. So that's talking about getting up early to do what? To pray. To meditate on the word. To seek after the truth. This is something that should be part of every Christian's life. We should daily be seeking after wisdom. I know it might sound silly, but we should all be philosophers. In other words, we should be lovers of wisdom, because wisdom is nothing other than the truth of God himself, and we need to seek that truth as part of our lives. The other thing it talks about here is contemplation, in other words, meditating on wisdom. To fix one's thoughts on her gives us understanding, it gives us knowledge. So what I think the link here is, between the old and new, is that this passage is describing someone who is vigilant and awake at night in pursuing the truth. You'll see this in the Catholic tradition with the monastic life, where the monks will rise in the middle of the night, they will get up in the middle of the night at a fixed hour in order to read the Psalms and to pray, to contemplate, to meditate. So they're kind of living out that idea of a vigilant search for wisdom. Well just like in the Old Testament, whoever is seeking wisdom gets up in the middle of the night or gets up very early to pursue her, so too the five wise virgins here are ready, they are prepared for the coming of the bridegroom. That's what I think the parallel is there.

And it's kind of buttressed by the Psalm for today. So the Psalm is Psalm 63, with the refrain being "My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God." This is a psalm

about longing for the Lord. This is a Psalm about meditating on the truth, about contemplation, about desiring to encounter God in prayer. And so it says this:

O God, thou art my God, I seek thee,  
my soul thirsts for thee;  
my flesh faints for thee,  
as in a dry and weary land where no water is.

If you skip down to verse 5-6:

My soul is feasted as with marrow and fat,  
and my mouth praises thee with joyful lips,  
when I think of thee upon my bed,  
and meditate on thee in the watches of the night;

So pause there. Notice what the psalmist is saying here. He meditates, he prays to God not just every now and then when he feels like it, he prays to God in the middle of the night. He rises to perform what tradition has called a vigil, a prayer vigil. You get up in the middle of the night to pray. It is kind of like fasting from food, but you are fasting from sleep in order to focus your mind and your heart on God when it is quiet and still. So when he says “I meditate...in the watches of the night”, that is the link with the parable, because one of the watches, one of the hours of watching was midnight. So the virgins in the parable encounter the bridegroom at midnight. He comes at one of the watches of the night and those who have the oil in their lamps are prepared. They are ready to meet him and go into the feast. So it is a little more of a difficult connection between the old and the new. It is not obvious, but I think you can see the thread there of prayerful vigilance and being ready to meet the Lord in the middle of the night, which is when the bridegroom comes in the parable.

I'll close my explanation here of this particular parable with a quote from St. Augustine. One of the things you will notice if you look at the ancient Church Fathers and Christian writers on the parable of the ten foolish virgins, one of the questions that they always had was what does the oil symbolize? Because that's really the critical element, the critical difference between the foolish virgins and the wise virgins. The wise ones have oil and the foolish ones don't. So if you look



at the Church Fathers, all of the Church Fathers that I read at least, they are pretty unanimous on interpreting the oil as a symbol for good works. This is what Augustine has to say about that. You can listen to this quote. He says:

They are both virgins, and yet half are rejected. It is not enough that they are virgins but that they also have lamps. They are virgins by reason of abstinence from unlawful indulgence of the senses. But they have lamps by reason of good works. Of these good works the Lord says, “Let your works shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:16). Again he said to his disciples, “Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning” (Luke 12:35). In the “girded loins” is virginity. In the “burning lamps” is good works.<sup>2</sup>

I think it's a really brilliant insight on Augustine's part. What he's doing is he's interpreting the image of a lamp in the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25 in light of the image of a lamp in Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount. So if you go back to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:16, sure enough, this is the passage when Jesus says “you are the light of the world.” And he says “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” So if the lamp is a symbol for good works in the Sermon on the Mount, the same thing is true about the lamp of the five wise virgins in the parable in Matthew 25. The reason they're able to light their lamps and let their light shine before men is because they have good works, because they've done good deeds, because they're actually living in accordance with the Gospel. They are following the will of the Father in heaven. So this is just one more example — and I hope you seen this over the course of our study of Matthew's Gospel — of why the Catholic Church does not accept the doctrine of sola fide. In other words, that we are saved by faith alone and that our works don't matter, that they don't play any role in our sanctification or in our final judgment; because over and over and over again in the Gospel Matthew, Jesus keeps driving the point home, time after time, that yes, faith is important; yes, believing him is essential; yes, having a relationship with him is essential; but we express that faith and we express that relationship through what he explicitly calls in Matthew 5, good works. That's our lamp that we shine before men.

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine, Sermon 93.2; trans. in M. Simonetti, p. 217

And so what Augustine is saying here is that the five foolish virgins who didn't have the oil to light their lamps were effectively Christians who may have even had the virtue of virginity. In other words, they might be celibate. They might have given up a family or spouse for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven, but if they don't unite that sexual abstinence, that state of celibacy to a life of virtue, then they risk being excluded from the kingdom of Heaven too. It is not enough to simply give things up. We also have to perform good works. Of course we do that always through God's grace, it is his grace working in us. Nevertheless, it is an essential part of the Christian life. So what Jesus is saying to the apostles then is that if you want to be ready for the final judgment, you need to be like the wise virgins. You need to not only have a lamp, but you need to let it shine. You need to have oil to light that lamp with your good deeds, so that your light might shine before your Father who is in heaven, and so that you might be ready to meet the bridegroom who comes at an hour that we do not expect.