

Pentecost +24  
Rev. Doug Floyd  
Matthew 25:1-13

This week we come to the strange parable of the 10 virgins. How do we read this little story? When I was young, this parable was preached as a warning that we might get left behind. We didn't want to end up like the foolish virgins. There are so many odd aspects to the story. 10 virgins waiting on a bridegroom at night. They're trying to keep the oil lamps burning but only five came prepared. They all fall asleep waiting on the bridegroom. When the bridegroom finally approaches, the foolish virgins realize they're oil is gone and they run to buy more oil in the middle of the night. They end up missing the bridegroom and are banned from the wedding.

You can imagine me trying to process this as a kid. I didn't even have a lamp let alone any oil. I was doomed for sure. That was my typical response to many parables: I'm doomed. Today I want us to try and hear the Gospel, the Good News in this story.

I like Nadia Bolz Weber's take on this story. She suggests the foolish virgins should not have run to find oil. They should have realized how generous is the Bridegroom and thrown themselves on his mercy. I like this reading but I am uncomfortable with her reading because Jesus does present the story as a warning. He ends the parable saying, "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."<sup>1</sup>

This warning could make some people think like I did as a kid, "I'm doomed." But this warning actually adds a bit of risk. It reminds us that the walk of faith is an adventure. Think of Indiana Jones. His stories are so compelling because he always brushes up against great dangers. If those didn't happen, the story would be a bit dull.

G.K. Chesterton suggested the life of faith is a great adventure. He writes, "[T]o a Christian existence is a story, which may end up in any way. In a thrilling novel (that purely Christian product) the hero is not eaten by cannibals; but it is essential to the existence of the thrill that he might be eaten by cannibals. The hero must (so to speak) be an eatable hero. So Christian morals have always said to the man, not that he would lose his soul, but that he must take care that he didn't."<sup>2</sup>

In the same essay, Chesterton goes on to say, "All Christianity concentrates on the man at the crossroads." Every day is lived at the crossroads. We make decisions, we act, we engage. We are caught up in a grand story, but we usually don't realize it. We might plunk along failing to see the glory and the horror all around us.

Let's accept that we have been born into a wondrous adventure. How do the 10 virgins fit into this story? We must read this whole parable through the lens of Biblical symbol. The prophets

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 25:12–13.

<sup>2</sup> Chesterton, G.K., *Orthodoxy with Annotations and Guide Reading by Trevin Wax*, B&H Academic, 2022.

often compared the ancient Hebrews to a virgin in the wilderness. The Lord covers her and leads her to Himself. The nation of Israel comes to be seen as a bride. When the people participate in pagan rituals, the bride is seen as committing adultery. With this in mind, we could read the 10 virgins as representing the people of God, the Bride of Christ. Jesus is talking to the disciples and telling them a series of stories about being ready, being watchful for the coming of the Son.

We could contrast this with the Pharisees who were not watchful. Though they claimed to long for the Messiah, they failed to see Him when He came. They were blind and deaf. Compare the Pharisees with Simeon and Anna. They were in the Temple when Mary presented the baby Jesus in the Temple. They recognized this baby to be the fulfillment of God's promise. They had eyes to see and ears to hear.

It is interesting that this story took place in the Temple. Our parable is about keeping lamps lit. The place where lamps burned in Israel's history was the Tabernacle and later the Temple. The lamps were to burn continuously. We read in Leviticus 24, "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup>"Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil from beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly. <sup>3</sup>Outside the veil of the testimony, in the tent of meeting, Aaron shall arrange it from evening to morning before the Lord regularly. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. <sup>4</sup>He shall arrange the lamps on the lampstand of pure gold before the Lord regularly."<sup>3</sup>

Later in 1 Samuel 3, we read about the story of judgment on the Tabernacle and upon the house of Eli. Listen to the beginning of the story.

"Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord in the presence of Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. <sup>2</sup>At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. <sup>3</sup>The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was."<sup>4</sup>

The lamp had not yet gone out. Eli had grown blind. Judgment was at the door. So there is a connection between the Tabernacle or Temple, that is the dwelling place of God and the burning lamp. When the lamp goes out, that's a bad sign. It is an image of faith grown cold. Now back to the story of Simeon and Anna. Even though most of Israel would not have eyes to see that Jesus was the promised Messiah, they could see it in the baby Jesus. They were the burning lamps in the Temple. For they had hearts turned toward the Lord, and by God's grace, they had eyes to see.

Jesus tells us that the eye is the lamp. He says, "Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body is full of darkness.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Le 24:1–4.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Sa 3:1–3.

Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness. If then your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly bright, as when a lamp with its rays gives you light.”<sup>5</sup>

Now how do we think about the oil? In the Old Testament, oil is a sign of prosperity, of God’s abundant blessings on His people. Olive oil is an important source of calories for the Mediterranean diet. Oil also plays a key role in the sacred. Sacrifices are anointed with oil. The priests are anointed with oil. All the utensils in the Temple are anointed with oil. The oil designates them as set apart unto the Lord. The oil marks them as holy unto God.

Think back to Simeon and Anna. They went to the Temple daily. They were marked as holy unto the Lord, much like the wise virgins watching and waiting for the Bridegroom. According to the symbolic imagery, they definitely were wise virgins watching and waiting for the coming of the Bridegroom.

Where does that leave us? We don’t have a Temple to go to daily. If you’ll remember, Paul calls us a Temple in 1 Corinthians. He writes, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”<sup>6</sup>

I think this might change the way we read the parable. We have been bought with a price. We have been bought through the death of Jesus Christ. Early 1 Corinthians 6, Paul writes. “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? (These are the foolish virgins.) He continues, “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”<sup>7</sup>

“And such were some of you.” We were like the foolish virgins standing outside the kingdom. But then we were washed, sanctified, justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God. We were marked as holy unto the Lord.

Specifically at our baptism we were set apart holy unto the Lord. In that sense, we became living lamps burning with the oil of the Holy Spirit. Now let’s return to our story.

Jesus offers the parable as a call to watch and wait for the coming bridegroom. Throughout Matthew He has been speaking of the kingdom of God, which was breaking in even as He spoke, but most people failed to see. Some began to follow Jesus, they didn’t understand it, but they were compelled to follow Him. They could see even if they couldn’t understand. He teaches them. He trains their eyes to see and their ears to hear. After the Resurrection, He

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<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 11:34–36.

<sup>6</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 6:19–20.

<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 6:9–11.

walks the disciples on the road to Emmaus through the Scriptures and revealed how the Scriptures were speaking of Him. Their eyes were being enlightened.

In that sense, they were becoming lamps that glow brighter and brighter. We are walking on that same road to Emmaus. We are waiting at the same dark hour for the coming of the bridegroom. Like Chesterton said, we stand at the crossroads.

Every day is lived at the crossroads. We make decisions, we act, we engage. We are caught up in a grand story, but we usually don't realize it. Like the old Gospel song, we are learning to keep our lamps "trimmed and burnin." Here's part of the song:

Well mother don't you stop prayin'  
Father keep right on prayin'  
Don't you stop prayin' for this old world is almost done  
Keep your lamps trimmed and burning  
Keep your lamps trimmed and burning  
Keep your lamps trimmed and burning

We are turning to the Lord in prayer. We are remembering the story of our faith by reading Scripture. Fr. John Behr calls Scripture, memory mediated by faith. It is telling our story as a part of the story of Jesus Christ: from Genesis to Revelation. We are a holy pilgrim people set apart unto our God. We are caught up in a holy adventure, but usually we don't realize it.

We desire eyes that see and ears that hear. We pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." And, "Blessed be God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever. Amen." And, "Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for everything in heaven and on earth is yours; yours is the Kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as Head above all."

Additionally, our Book of Common Prayer offers us collects to pray. Here are three rich collect to pray for a people watching waiting on the Lord each day. (2019 BCP, 109)

"Thou, who with thine own mouth hast told us that at midnight the bridegroom shall come: Grant that the cry, "The bridegroom cometh!" may sound evermore in our ears, that so we be never unprepared to meet him, or forgetful of the souls for whom he died, for whom we watch and pray. And save us, O Lord. Amen." (2019 BCP, 109)

O eternal Lord God, you hold all souls in life: Shed forth upon your whole Church in Paradise and on earth the bright beams of your light and heavenly comfort; and grant that we, following the good example of those who have loved and served you here and are now at rest, may enter with them into the fullness of your unending joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (2019 BCP, 113)

Hasten, O Father, the coming of your kingdom; and grant that we your servants, who now live by faith, may with joy behold your Son at his coming in glorious majesty; even Jesus Christ, our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen. (2019 BCP, 115)