

Lamp & Oil
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 25:1-13)

During this season of November when the days become dark and the Church year comes to its end, the liturgy directs our minds to the “Last Things,” to death and what awaits us afterward, and to the coming of Christ.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins is an exhortation for Christians to live in such a way they are prepared at the time of death to enter heaven, which Christ describes as a **wedding banquet**. The Church as a whole is the Bride of Christ, but the individual members of the Church are depicted as bridesmaids, torch-bearers who accompany the Church into glory and participate in the great feast through her.

The bridesmaids are young virgins. This **virginity** signifies baptismal purity and sinlessness. In Baptism we receive the white garment of our consecration to God. Christian life is lived from the perspective of the baptismal “betrothal” to Christ, who leaves for a time to prepare a place with him in his Father’s house, soon to return and bring his Bride with him into the heavenly dwelling (Jn 14:2-3). Within the Church, the baptismal vocation of all Christians is lived through a special charism by those in religious life, the “consecrated virgins.” Love for Christ, and longing for heaven, should characterize every aspect of our earthly life; we are to live in readiness and expectation of the Bridegroom, looking toward the second coming of Christ.

The virgins bear **lamps**, which are also a symbol of baptism. Through baptism we receive the “Light of Christ” into our soul, and become Temples for the Holy Spirit. Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount: “*You are the light of the world; let your light shine before men...*” (Mt 5:14-6). Mary echoes this same idea in the Magnificat when she says, “*My soul magnifies the Lord*” (Lk 1:46).

There are **ten** virgins in the parable. This possibly alludes to the ten commandments, signifying the life of holiness to which a Christian is called. Likewise, the fact that **five** of the virgins are wise may refer to the five scrolls of the Torah, God’s holy Law which is the source of perfect wisdom (cf. Sir 24:23).

The virgins **fall asleep**, indicating death. The first generation of Christians expected Christ to return within their lifetimes, but St. Paul explains this is not the case (1 Th 4:13-18). Except for that privileged final generation who will be caught up with the Lord directly into the heavenly glory (1 Th 4:17), Christians may expect to meet the Lord after death, when Christ calls forth the soul from the body.

As they go to meet Christ, the virgins **trim the lamps**. A poorly trimmed wick makes a dim and smoky flame, whereas a properly trimmed wick burns clean and bright. By keeping the commandments, and living a holy life according to God's Word which purifies and prunes, Christians are prepared to shine brightly. After death, the light within the soul will shine even more perfectly than it did while in the flesh: *"Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father"* (Mt 13:43).

It is the **wise** virgins whose lamps will shine in heavenly glory: *"Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever"* (Dn 12:3). It is above all due to the oil that the virgins are made wise.

In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the most important detail is the **oil**, without which the lamp cannot burn. If the lamp signifies Baptism, the oil would signify the anointing of Holy Spirit received through Confirmation, what the Bible calls the "Oil of gladness" (Ps 44:6). Through this anointing a Christian receives the seven-fold gift of the Holy Spirit, whose first characteristic is Wisdom. In addition, He is the Spirit of Understanding, Knowledge, Counsel, Piety, Strength, and Fear of the Lord.

A Christian is blessed with this "Heavenly Gift of God Most High" (cf. Hymn, *Veni Creator Spiritus*) in order to live and act as a Christian, possessing the "mind of Christ" (Phi 2:5; 1 Cor 2:16), possessing the very "Spirit of Christ" (Rm 8:9, Gal 4:6). The light of Christ is manifested in works of charity: *"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven"* (Mt 5:16). The oil is "good works," carried out through the Spirit of Christ; it is faith put into practice.

When we die and go before God, we cannot take much with us from this life. Even our body must be left behind. But our good deeds go with us, and in fact are necessary for entrance into the heavenly banquet. What good is a Baptism that has never been put into practice? Or, as Jesus will explain in the next parable (Mt 25:14-30), what use is a talent that was never invested? Christ **knows not** the baptized Christian without good works. Baptism is not magic. Baptism is necessary for salvation, but is useless for salvation without a holy life.

The virgins gain the necessary oil by trading in the **marketplace**. This is the world. It is here that the Christian is able to put the spiritual gifts to work, in order to increase supply. The Gifts of the Holy Spirit are given in order to produce Fruits of the Holy Spirit. The oil of charity is increased by means of spending, investing, giving. The more that is given in love, through good works, the more brightly the light of Christ will shine, both on earth and in heaven.

The time for increasing the oil is in this life. After death, there is nothing more that can be done, because the ability to merit is ended. The wise virgins are **not able to share their oil** with the foolish bridesmaids. On the day of judgment, each will be judged on the merits of his own life.

One more detail from this parable seems curious. The door is shut to the foolish virgins, who are not ready for heaven, yet they are told even after their “falling asleep” to **go to the market and buy for yourselves the oil you need**. How can they buy more oil if they are already dead? While this parable is not explicit, it is a truth that following death there is a grace of final purification for the imperfect, a final mercy for those who die in the covenant of their baptism, yet die with insufficient oil due to venial sins and too great an attachment to the world. The language of the Lord against the foolish virgins in the parable is severe, yet not as severe as other parables where the damned are clearly being described as “bound hand and foot,” “cast into the darkness outside,” and subjected to “wailing and grinding of teeth” (cf. Mt 22:13, 8:12, 13:42, etc.).

Perhaps the door will remain shut only for a time in the case of these foolish bridesmaids who failed to use their time on earth wisely? The doctrine of Purgatory teaches that following death, some souls require additional purification and preparation for heaven. Yet there is nothing more they can do for themselves, but depend on the Church on earth. The foolish virgins are “sent back to the marketplace,” signifying the special role the Church on earth has, to trade and merit increase on behalf of the faithful departed, and beg the Lord his mercy to open that door for them. While in this life, we can certainly offer our personal sacrifices, in union with the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, on behalf of others, interceding for them and actually obtaining for them special graces they would not otherwise receive. This includes those already asleep.

As we come to the end of this Church year and reflect on the Last Things, let us purchase as much oil as possible, devoting ourselves to the Christian life, keeping the 10 commandments, instructed and purified in the wisdom of God’s Word, and above all putting into practice the Gifts of the Holy Spirit through a life of good works and charity. In this way death will not catch us unprepared, and the midnight cry announcing the Feast will waken us to joy, and not dread or regret.