

## Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Wisdom 6:12-16

Psalm 62

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matt 25:1-3

Jesus frequently used a wedding feast as a symbol of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is a wonderfully joyful image of the life that awaits the faithful, although it is also tempered by the fact that some who are invited are either not interested or not ready to accept. In this way, today's Gospel passage—as with all of the parables that Jesus offers towards the end of Matthew's Gospel—is a fitting way to move toward the end of the liturgical year, in that it speaks to the accountability required of Christians as we prepare for our glorious encounter with Christ.

Today's parable begins with ten bridesmaids awaiting the return of the Bridegroom. According to the marriage customs of Jesus' day, a bride would be betrothed to her husband, but she would continue to live with her family for a period of time while the groom made the preparations. Then, a few months later, the wedding ceremony proper would culminate with the groom—accompanied by his relatives—going to the bride's family house to claim his wife. He would then lead her family and the bridal party to the wedding feast in their new home, and in so doing celebrate and inaugurate their new life together.

And so the ten bridesmaids in today's parable—who would normally be the groom's sisters and female cousins—are awaiting his ceremonial return. However, the Bridegroom is delayed, and the young women become drowsy and fall asleep. When he finally approaches at midnight, it becomes clear to five of the bridesmaids that they were not sufficiently prepared for such a turn of events. Their role in the ceremony was to light the way for the returning bridal party, but their oil by this time has run out. They beg to borrow oil from the others who *were* prepared for such an occurrence, but they are reluctant to share out what they had, because then none of the ten would have enough oil. If you wanted to make a Dad joke I suppose you could say that this was the first Middle-Eastern oil-crisis (!).

And so the five foolish bridesmaids go off to buy more oil, and while they're away, the bridegroom arrives, everyone is ushered into the marriage feast, and the door is bolted shut behind them. They miss out on the wedding banquet. Jesus finishes the parable by exhorting his listeners to "stay awake", because they do not know the day or the hour of his return.

As an aside, I find it interesting that the bridesmaids were out *shopping* when the Bridegroom came. Jesus could have been thinking of our very day and age when he included this detail. After all, I always found it strange that the bridesmaids should have hoped to find someone to sell them oil in the middle of the night. But for us, 2,000 years later, it's not so odd. Not only can we go shopping late into the night, we

can also shop online at Amazon in the early A.M. How often can we find ourselves running around after material concerns, such that we risk missing the Lord when he comes knocking on the door of our soul?

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Okay. So in the parable's symbolism, the Bridegroom is obviously Jesus himself. Indeed, he has already spoken of himself as the Bridegroom earlier in the gospels, when he noted that his followers cannot be expected to fast while the Bridegroom is still with them. As the Bridegroom, Jesus fulfils the Lord's ancient promise to join himself forever to His chosen people "as a husband cleaves to his bride".

As for the bridesmaids, they represent *us*—the members of the Church. We were "betrothed" to Jesus at our baptism, and we are called to live lives of holiness and devotion until he comes again to lead us to the heavenly wedding feast at the end of time.

Now, in our day, it's worth acknowledging that even very serious Catholics often don't spend a whole lot of time thinking about the Lord's return. Our default position is probably to think that, unless we manage to destroy ourselves or render our planet uninhabitable, human civilisation will just keep rolling on indefinitely. But for the early Church, the fact of Christ's return was ever-present in their minds. They believed that his return was imminent – and indeed, for the Lord, a thousand years are like yesterday come and gone.

As we heard in the second reading from Saint Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, speculation about the time and circumstances of the Lord's second coming was rampant among many early believers. And when a number of years had passed after the Ascension, there was some disquiet among the Churches about what the Lord's apparent delay might mean.

As such, the delay of the Bridegroom in today's parable may well have been Jesus' way of pre-empting this debate. In a sense, he is showing his followers how they are to live during this apparent delay so as to remain prepared for his glorious second coming. He is warning us to live lives of watchfulness and prudent preparedness.

So what is represented by the "oil" needed to keep the lamps burning brightly, and which is described as being an indispensable prerequisite for admittance into the wedding banquet?

Saint Augustine and other ancient commentators saw the oil as symbolic of the little acts of love, kindness, patience, joy, and selflessness that make it possible for others to see the light of Christ through us. Saint Teresa of Calcutta also made use of this imagery:

"What are the oil lamps in our lives?

They are the little everyday things:  
faithfulness, punctuality, kind words,  
thoughtfulness of another person,  
the way we are silent at times,  
the way we look at things,  
the way we speak, the way we act.  
Those are the little drops of love  
which make it possible for our life of faith to shine brightly.”

Jesus called us—his followers—to be the light of the world, to let our light shine so that people will see our good works and give praise to our Father in heaven. And just as the oil was needed to allow the light of the lamp to shine, so we need the oil of love and the other spiritual fruits in order to allow the light of Christ to shine through us.

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So when the night is dark and the Lord seems to be far away—when there are wars, social divisions, and various forms of cultural malaise—we are called to keep vigil – to watch and pray. We need to keep our souls’ lamps filled with the oil of perseverance and the desire for God. We are to seek him in love, meditating upon his kindness, calling upon his name, striving to be ever more worthy of him, and to be spiritually ready for him when he comes.

If we do this, we will be like the wise bridesmaids, and the oil for our lamps will not run dry. We will witness the Bridegroom hastening toward us, beckoning us to the table he has prepared – a rich and glorious banquet, which will satisfy the deepest longings of our souls.