

Sermon for the Last Sunday of the Church Year – Matthew 25:1-13
In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When Jesus tells a parable, pay attention: the meaning is in the details. Who represents whom? Well, in today's parable of the wise and foolish virgins the bridegroom is Jesus – that's easy. The wedding is the coming of the end of the age: for the Scriptures call the new heavens and the new earth the unending marriage feast of the Lamb of God. And the ten bridesmaids – five wise and five foolish – are the saved and the condemned. Last week, Jesus says that at His coming He will separate the saved and damned as a shepherd separates sheep and goats to right and left. And so, five foolish virgins for the left hand, and five wise virgins for the right hand.

And as these 10 bridesmaids wait for the bridegroom to come, as they sit around and chat away the hours, and then finally, they all fall asleep. For these bridesmaids are all weak and of the flesh, as all people are. What does this mean? As St. Paul often calls death a "falling asleep," so also it is in this parable: all the virgins sleep, whether they are of the wise or the foolish type, the saved or the damned, all will eventually suffer death.

And then the Bridegroom appears! The Lord Jesus returns to raise the living and the dead. He awakens both the wise and the foolish. He raises the saved and the condemned. As he once raised Jairus' daughter, and the widow of Nain's son, and his friend Lazarus – so also Jesus will raise all the dead. And not just for an earthly span of life as he did with Lazarus, but for all eternity in a new body made to last forever.

So to sum it up again, the virgins are the people of earth, the saved and the condemned; the bridegroom is Jesus; the sleep of the virgins is death; the return of the bridegroom is the Resurrection and judgment; and the wedding feast is the eternally blessed life with God. But what of the oil? That's the detail that cannot be passed over, for it is what separates the wise from the foolish, the saved from the damned.

Ask the question another way: why do the wise virgins bring the oil and the foolish virgins do not? When the Bridegroom withdraws His presence from the virgins He says to them, "In a little while you will see me no longer, and again in a little while you will see me. So be ready. I shall appear like a thief in the night. No one knows the day or the hour. So what I say to you, I say to all: Watch."

And so the wise virgins say, "Amen, Come Lord Jesus. We believe that you shall come to be our judge. We believe your word." Therefore, they bring that extra oil. For since the Bridegroom promised that His return could be at any time, they brought along oil to make it through the night. The oil shows they believe His word. The oil is faith.

And this is what makes the foolish virgins foolish: they have no oil – that is to say they have no faith, because they do not believe the promise of the Bridegroom. "In a little while you will see me no longer and again in a little while you will see me. I shall appear like a thief in the night, so be ready. Watch!" But the foolish virgins reply, "Yeah, right. He's gone and He's never coming back. What's the use of lugging around an extra jug of oil when we won't use it anyway?!? We'll go to sleep and that's it. No waking up during the night, no need for a long-burning lamp." And so they bring no oil because they don't believe His word of promise.

And it will be too late on that day of the Bridegroom's arrival, the Day of Christ's return, to get the oil of faith. When the Bridegroom comes and leads the wise virgins to His marriage feast, the foolish stand outside and cry, "Lord, Lord, open to us! Let us in!" But not everyone who says to Him, "Lord, Lord" will enter the marriage feast, but only those who do the will of the Father – that is believing and trusting in His Son and His promise.

So on that final day, it is too late to get oil, it is too late to believe: "Go and buy some oil yourselves!" say the wise to the foolish. And they say it by way of rebuke, of course, because there is no buying oil at midnight. There is no imparting of faith after someone has died. At the last day, everyone will know that Jesus has returned, that His promises were true, that He is God in the flesh. You cannot get faith on that day because on that day there will be no more need of faith: for faith will be replaced by sight. We will see what we always believed to be true: what Jesus had always promised comes to be. But for those who now reject His word, who refuse to believe He speaks the truth, it will be too late for them: for they will be seeing that which they always denied was true. So, dearly beloved, hearken to the Word of the Lord. His word is truth and His promises are sure.

And this is His promise for us: Though your sins be as scarlet, they are made white as wool. Though we are just as susceptible to the sleep of death as the foolish virgins, though we too have earned the grave as the wage of our sins, though we too have back-stabbed and slandered, lied and stolen, cheated and been cruel, doubted and wavered, that though all this is true: the Bridegroom will bring us salvation. The Bridegroom called Christ has provided for the wedding feast out of His own pocket: and it cost Him everything He had. He poured out His very life on the cross that our sins might be paid for. He succumbed to death so that our death might be but a little sleep from which He will awaken us for an eternity when He returns.

In the meantime, we live by faith and not by sight. It's true: we cannot see the Bridegroom now. But don't think for an instant that the Lord Jesus has left us. Don't let your eyes make you foolish. That's the real problem with the foolish virgins: since they do not see the Bridegroom, they assume He has left them forever. But Christians see with their ears, not their eyes. We know that Jesus has not left us, but just removed His visibility from us. Still Jesus cares for our every need. Still Jesus calls us from death to life. Only now, instead of walking up to a boat or a tax-collector's booth and saying, "Simon Peter, Matthew, follow me," Jesus now comes to us at the font of baptism and calls us by name saying, "Follow me. You are mine." It looks as though it is just a man in a funny robe who baptizes, but the Word and promise of Jesus declare that He Himself does this work.

In His earthly ministry, Jesus touched many people to bless them and said, "Take heart, your sins are forgiven." He still does the same thing. Only now, He does this through the Holy Ministry in Confession and Absolution. It's the voice of a man, to be sure, that brings the absolution, but it is the Word of Jesus that gives the power and authority behind that word.

And on that Good Friday, Jesus lifted up His Body and Blood to be broken and shed for the forgiveness of sins for all to see. Today, we receive that same Body and Blood which continues to plead to the Father for our forgiveness, under what appears to be only bread and wine. Yet the eyes of faith are the ears of believers: when Jesus says, "This is my Body," "This is my Blood," the ears of the wise believe it. We say, "Amen, Lord Jesus. Your Word is sure. You are the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. You are here in the flesh."

And so the feast begins even now: even now the Bridegroom is with us, even in His Flesh and Blood. Though we cannot see Him, we receive Him and love Him now. There only remains a little sleep, then the waking of the Resurrection, and then our eyes will see what our ears already have. Faith will give way to sight. And all the Lord's promises will be fully and completely fulfilled. Even so, Come Lord Jesus. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠