

Homily – Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus told his disciples this parable:  
"The kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins  
who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.  
Five of them were foolish and five were wise.  
The foolish ones, when taking their lamps,  
brought no oil with them,  
but the wise brought flasks of oil with their lamps.  
Since the bridegroom was long delayed,  
they all became drowsy and fell asleep.  
At midnight, there was a cry,  
'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'  
Then all those virgins got up and trimmed their lamps.  
The foolish ones said to the wise,  
'Give us some of your oil,  
for our lamps are going out.'  
But the wise ones replied,  
'No, for there may not be enough for us and you.  
Go instead to the merchants and buy some for yourselves.'  
While they went off to buy it,  
the bridegroom came  
and those who were ready went into the wedding feast with him.  
Then the door was locked.  
Afterwards the other virgins came and said,  
'Lord, Lord, open the door for us!'  
But he said in reply,  
'Amen, I say to you, I do not know you.'  
Therefore, stay awake,  
for you know neither the day nor the hour."

Gospel Study – Word to the Wise

I can't tell you how much I enjoy preparing for these Gospel Studies. There is always so much I learn, and hopefully we can learn together, about these great lessons for life. I'd like to begin by sharing a story I heard some years ago, told about the conference that Lucifer, the chief devil, had called. He called together all the devils, in order to plot and scheme as to how they could keep us human beings from getting into Heaven. Lucifer asked the leading question, "What have you found to be the greatest strategy that we could together use to bar people from the gate of Heaven?"

One devil volunteered and thought, "What if we were to just convince people there is no God?" And after some discussion and deliberation they decided, "Well a lot of people may fall for it, but the majority won't—you can just see all through creation there are just too many signs of God's presence--and most people will see after a while that there is a Supreme Being."

Then another devil suggested, "How about we try to convince, then, that there's no Hell. People would love to hear that and then they would be dissuaded from trying to live a good life. What do you think?" Again they discussed this at some length and shared and swapped different stories and finally decided, "Well that would work with a lot, but not with most, because God has put a conscience in them, and they would see that there are consequences to their decisions and choices and they know that they would have to be responsible for any misdeeds and there would be a judgment."

So again there was some silence and one devil finally recommended, "How about we just let them think there is a God, and let them think there is Heaven and Hell, but we just convince them there's no hurry. There's just no hurry. They can go on with life as it were." Everyone thought that would be it, because procrastination and distraction are the greatest temptations. Ever since that conference, the story goes, that's been one of Satan's greatest temptations. And that's what this parable is about today.

The point is, we know not when the end is to come, but we must be prepared and so we will be looking at this urgent and important question, "How do we prepare for the Lord's coming?" Jesus tells this marvelous parable, as you just heard, I would like to give some wonderful background material that I've learned this week. It is in fact the parable where Jesus describes what was very common place in terms of what the 1st Century Jewish wedding customs were. The marriage back in Jesus' time was mainly arranged by the mothers. Some may say that times have not changed.

But in any case, marriages were pre-arranged by the parents. The mother had, probably, the leading hand, although the father was the one who would write the contract (both the father of the groom and the father of the bride). You might keep in mind the story of the *Fiddler on the Roof*. Remember how they tried to plan and prepare for the wedding of their daughters. Remember the song: *Matchmaker, Matchmaker, Make Me a Match*. This is how it was done then. For the young couple, whose marriage was already pre-arranged at early life, would then later (after the parents decided that the time was right and the couple themselves were ready) experience the long marriage ceremony.

The high point of this ceremony was where the groom, who was accompanied by his relatives, would go to the house of the bride and her family, to claim her as his wife. Then he would take her back in a long wedding procession to his family's house where the celebration and feast would begin. This is the point of which the parable begins, where Jesus says "The reign of God is likened to 10 bridesmaids, who took their torches to go out and welcome the groom."

These bridesmaids would be, in this case, the groom's sisters and cousins and relatives and friends. They would take these torches, which were these oil lamps, that were lit by the wick and supplied by the oil to burn brightly. Obviously they were assuming that the groom would be coming sometime in the night time which builds the suspense of the story. It's also assumed that this wedding party—this entourage, that would meet the groom and bride—walked some distance in order to lead them to this final procession, like the red carpet treatment if you will.

Now we're told 5 of them were foolish and 5 were sensible. The 5 of them that were foolish, were foolish because they failed to foresee the possibility that the groom would be delayed, and therefore, they neglected to make the necessary preparations to take along an extra supply of oil. They only lived for the moment. Keep that in mind: *they lived for the moment*. Even more, when they realized the bridegroom was delayed, they didn't take this opportunity to prepare for that necessity. The Greek word used here, *phronimus*, means prudent, and prudent is to be wise in very practical matters and careful in providing for the future. So these 5 women were wise in so far as they foresaw the possibility that they would need this extra supply of oil and they took these little jugs with handles. And we are told, the groom delayed his coming, keep that in mind as all this will start coming together. Jesus is crafting this parable with a very intended meaning. Interestingly, I also read in the commentary that it was often that the groom was delayed in this final procession home because he had to work out final negotiations with the bride's father. You know, "How many chickens will you give me? That cow? Or this, or that?" And somehow it was not uncommon that this would delay the whole wedding procession.

At midnight—again keep that in mind, as all of this has a rich symbolism—someone shouted, "The groom is here! Come out to greet him!" And all the virgins woke up. Now, "the virgins" is better translated I understand as, "maids" or "bridesmaids" or simply "women." They were awakened from their sleep to immediately get their torches ready. Again, to be awakened means what? It means: *to get the light ready*. The two go together. They do this very pragmatically by putting the lamp out for a moment to give a new wick to burn brightly and then filling the lamp with oil so that it could really burn brilliantly.

At that point, the foolish ones would have noticed that they were out of oil and their light was growing dimmer and dimmer and so they asked for the wise to share with them, and the wise said, "Wait a minute." They were faced with this dilemma: "If we give it to you, we won't have enough for ourselves and we'll all be left in the dark." So they told them to go off to buy some from the dealers, but of course it's highly unlikely at midnight that the oil dealer will be awake to sell to them, but that's a minor detail of the story. The more important point that leads to building up the suspense and conclusion, the wise were those who were ready and prepared, who anticipated this coming of the bridegroom, and who were welcomed into the great feast. Then the door was barred. What does that mean? You can almost hear the slamming shut of that door. What does that door mean? And then the foolish ones come along too late and are not welcomed in. What does that mean?

The moral of the story, Jesus tells us, is: **Keep your eyes open, for you know not the day nor the hour.** Now the purpose of a parable, as you might know, is to make this single, and powerful, point. This is a word to the wise; to always be ready for the coming of the Lord. As we look at the bridegroom, who does the bridegroom represent? He is Jesus, who, as you know, will return in glory to claim His bride, who is the Church; all of us.

Who do the 10 bridesmaids represent? They are the disciples; all of us who are awaiting the Lord's coming. For the early Church who knew Matthew's Gospel it seemed like the Lord was coming soon. When He left He said, "I will be back to take you with me." But then they waited and waited and it seemed like His coming was delayed. That's how we all feel, especially in our youth. We think, "Oh, death is so far off you know." And the 5 who are prepared are *the wise*,

and the 5 who are unprepared are *otherwise*, we might say. The wedding feast, as you could guess, represents the eternal feast of Heaven. The real question is: What does it mean to have a sufficient supply of oil? What does the oil mean for you?

Is it good works? Grace? A good life? Courage? Life? Love? The word that comes to my mind is: *Wisdom*. This Gospel is all about wisdom. It is about being full of wisdom so as to be enlightened by the Holy Spirit so that we will not walk in the dark and be unprepared. That we would have the wisdom to see God, especially the Lord Jesus, coming to us. And so, I'd like to just raise this question, but first let me give a word of caution. Because this is a parable, it should not be read too much as an allegory; not everything may have some meaning like an allegory would. I say that because this could be otherwise misinterpreted, why Jesus would then be barring the door, closing the door in anyone's face, when Christ clearly comes to open the doors of Heaven and salvation to everyone.

What is that door that shuts in our face? Is it not how death comes upon us and adds final closure to the end of our life and the end of our choices? And it is not to suggest, I should say, that disciples shouldn't be sharing what we have, but some things you can only get on your own for yourself, such as wisdom. So, the question this all leads up to—and this is what I'd love you to grapple with today and this week—Can you define for me wisdom? What is wisdom? How would you describe it? How do you come upon it?

I offer this suggestion, and then your definition will be the best, but I have come to appreciate that wisdom is to see and understand all as God's sees and understands all. Wisdom is to see yourself as God sees you and how different that usually is from how I see me? You know? It's to see another person as God sees them, and not as I can critically review them. It's to see my life in review or preview; in hindsight or foresight, as God sees my life. Doesn't God see it so differently than how we ordinarily see it in a small dim light.

Wisdom is to see with the light of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit that we know to be the source of wisdom that comes to us. We might understand wisdom best by looking at people who are wise. Who, in your estimation, is a wise person? Who comes to your mind and what do they teach you about wisdom?

I think immediately about Cardinal Bernardin, who I think God has shed a light on to say, "This is truly a wise and holy and good man." I loved the editorial illustration in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* on All Saints Day (appropriately) where you may have seen this picture of God in the Heavens and standing next to him is an Angel and God says to the Angel: "I used to think that Bernardin fellow might be good Pope material." And then His afterthought is: ". . . but I think I'll promote him straight to Saint." I believe that we learn wisdom by being around wise people. They have so much to teach us, so much to reveal to us. There's so much light that they illuminate.

We might ask another further question. How do we grow in wisdom? How have you found that you have grown in wisdom? This is so important because, remember, wisdom is that light and not to have wisdom is to be walking and living in the dark. And as you look around the world, isn't it amazing how many of us are still in the dark as to what really matters most in life? You

know? And how many of us fail to have that enlightenment to see what matters most? We might need to do what Cardinal Bernardin said when he called this important meeting for the common ground for Catholics to come together for a deeper understanding for that light of the Holy Spirit. He began his talk by saying, "I don't have long to live. And a man who doesn't have long to live doesn't have time for unimportant matters." Wow. I love that. And he says, "This is so important, that we learn to understand each other and come to real wisdom."

I just read last night this document on common ground. It's filled with light and wisdom saying to the conservatives, "You need to listen to the liberals." and "Liberals, you need to listen to conservatives." There is insight from people on both sides of the issue. We need to quit being so defensive and, worse yet, quit being so offensive to each other and learn to be open to the insight we all bring to each other and especially the wisdom of the Spirit that speaks to us in the Sacred Scripture and that comes to us in the light of Jesus Christ, who is the light of the world. Wow. It's just really wise.

Where do we go for such wisdom? I think, as all of us would know that if it truly is the gift of the Holy Spirit, then we should ask for that gift of the Holy Spirit. It comes when one asks. The Letter James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, they should ask God for it and it will be given to them." What a promise! Ask for it. Seek wisdom and wisdom will seek you out. Also, my hope is that we would recognize that it's here, as we come together to study the Bible—most especially the Gospel—that we are enlightened. This is the inspired word of God that is filled with wisdom. Every word is inspired, that is enlightened, and can guide us. It is the sure light that will lead us in the right path. This is how we are enlightened by the Word of God. We who become students of the Scripture are fed and filled with that wisdom of the Lord.

I also would add, it seems to me, wisdom comes when we are ready to hear it and learn it. You know what I mean? It comes when we are needing wisdom. You've heard the proverb: *When the student is ready, the teacher appears?* And so we need to prepare for and see our need for it, and then to let life teach us. I believe that every day the Lord teaches us lessons, doesn't he? And what I've tried to do is, I keep a journal and I write down in my journal the lessons the Lord is teaching me. I'm always amazed, every day, there's something the Lord is teaching. Largely He teaches from my mistakes and oversights. I would suggest in those moments of prayer that every day we take a moment to ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom that we could see and learn, "What is God wanting to say to us, teach us, show us, reveal to us?" That is the oil that will just allow us, then, to always live in the light; to walk with the Lord. That being said, let me add one final thing.

As I've already alluded to, I find great wisdom in being with wise people who have learned the hard way—you know—because I don't know about you, but I can identify with those 5 unwise women in the Gospel. In fact, every time I jump into my car and look and see the gas tank is on empty, I think of those 5 foolish bridesmaids who went without oil. We are so used to just meeting the moment and living in the moment. We fail to live with greater foresight for what matters most. We might ask ourselves, if we knew, like Cardinal Bernardin, that we had only a few months to live...What would we do? What changes would we make? One person said to me, "I know what I'd do, I'd turn off the TV and I'd turn my life more to the Lord. I'd go to

Fr Jim Willig Gospel Study – Word to the Wise, Matthew 25:1-13

Confession. I'd reconcile with the people I needed to make amends to and I'd try to live entirely for the Lord."

Well then, isn't that what we need to do? The Lord is coming. In fact, He is here.

Amen.