

32 SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

NOVEMBER 12, 2023

MATTHEW 24:42a-44

This Sunday's readings bring the usual warnings about preparation for the end of our own world, the end of our own time, and our passage to another world. They tell us that a searching, watching, and growing heart is essential for a lively, dynamic Faith in God. They ask us whether we are ready for these events and how we are preparing for them.

This parable has both a local and a universal meaning. The local meaning is that the foolish virgins represent the "Chosen People of God" who were waiting for the Messiah but were shut out from the Messianic banquet because they were unprepared. "The division between the wise and the foolish virgins becomes the division between those in Matthew's church who keep the commandments of Christ, the new lawgiver of the church, and those who hear his words but fail to do what he commands. "The universal meaning is that the five foolish virgins represent those who fail to prepare for the end of their lives. What matters is not the occasional or the last-minute burst of spiritual fervor but habitual attention to one's responsibilities before God. At the final judgment, there will be no depending upon the resources of others, no begging or borrowing of grace. Some are used to depending upon others' prayers, others' gifts, others' compassion, and others' Faith. But there are certain things we must win or acquire for ourselves for we cannot borrow them from others. Close relationship with God is the most important thing. The parable implies that we should attend to the duties of the present moment, preparing now rather than waiting until it is too late.

We need to be wise enough to remain ever-prepared: Wise Christians live each day in the light of Jesus' vision. Such people find Him in the most ordinary experiences of daily living — in the people they meet, the events that take place, and the situations in which they find themselves. They carefully make their daily choices for God. They are ready to put the commandment of love into practice by kindness and forgiveness. There is absolutely no better way to prepare for the final call than to learn to spend each day in the company of Jesus, remembering his assurance, "I am with you always." The following short prayer should be always on their lips: "Lord, grant that all my thoughts, intentions, actions, and responses may be directed solely to Your love and service this day. Help me, Lord, to seek, to find, and to respond to You in every single experience this day." When we eventually hear the final call, "Get up! The Master is coming!" we will not be worried, but happy and more than ready to meet Him, as well as old friends and family, in Heaven. God has made this promise to us: "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever" (Dn 12:3).

Let us be sure that our Lamps are ready for the end of our lives: Spiritual readiness, preparation and growth do not just happen. They come as a result of intentional habits built into one's life. We cannot depend on a Sunday morning Mass to provide all our spiritual needs. We cannot depend on Christian fellowship to provide us with spiritual development. These things come through routine, mundane attention to ordinary spiritual disciplines — making sure we have enough oil: spiritual fuel. They come when we habitually take time for prayer and being alone with God. They come through reading God's Word; living a sacramental life; performing acts of service for others; being morally faithful; obeying God with love, and spending time with other Christians for mutual prayer, study, and encouragement. These are the things that, along with the normal difficulties of life, enable one to grow in Christ and to be prepared for Christ's coming. Without these things, we will not be prepared. The preparation cannot be hit-or-miss, nor can it be postponed. We dare not procrastinate, lest death come unexpectedly and ruin us. We need to develop those things that encourage our spiritual growth into holy habits in our lives, for that growth must take precedence over other interests and claims on our time and attention. As these habits become entrenched, they cease to be a struggle for us and begin to be a source of strength and blessing. They make our lives powerful against the onslaught of the world.

What is the oil that we lack? Oil in Scripture is often a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we try to spring into action without first submitting our work to the Holy Spirit. Or perhaps we lack the oil of kindness and compassion. There's no way we can be ready to meet Jesus without the essential oils of compassion and mercy. Perhaps we lack the oil of patience and sympathy. Without such oil, we're ill-equipped to deal with someone who comes to us in need of long-term love and guidance. Perhaps we're short of the oil of education and instruction, or we're not adequately trained and lack the proper skills to be of service in areas where help is needed. Perhaps God is calling us to take our expertise and skills to another level so that we may more adequately meet Jesus in the people God allows to enter our lives. I need to have the oil of being in a state of grace. If I do not, I am in the empty state of mortal sin. Ignatius of Loyola's famous prayer is the prayer of the follower of Jesus; 'Lord, teach me to know you more, love you more, and serve you more faithfully in my life.' The "more" indicates that our spiritual life on earth is always in process, never a finished product: like love and friendship it grows in our lives. It is exciting that Jesus is never gone from us: risen from the dead he is always alive, always new. Our reading of the Gospel, our sharing at Mass and the sacraments and our personal prayer keep this relationship always alive, always new.