

## 32 Sunday in Ordinary Time + 12 November 2023 + Mt 25:1-13

This is not an easy time of the year for us in Michigan. The days are getting shorter, darker, and colder. I don't know about you, sometimes I have to add an extra cup of coffee or sneak in a little nap in order to keep going. So if there is anything to be gained from this time of year, it teaches us a very important spiritual lesson: namely, we have to fight to stay awake, in order to be ready for the coming of the Lord.

And this is the meaning of our Gospel today. We don't know when the Lord will call us home, or if He will come again in glory before we die. This was sadly brought home to my family last week when a distant cousin suddenly died of an apparent stroke. It was a shock to all of us, but also an important reminder that we *know neither the day nor the hour*. But we do know that He will come someday, and we pray that we will not then be locked out of the eternal marriage supper of the Lamb. Regarding our parable today, during the time of Christ, it was common for the bridegroom to lead a procession of virgins, or "bridesmaids," as we would say, to accompany his bride to their new home. Once arrived, they would all celebrate a week-long wedding feast. But in this parable, the bridegroom is *long delayed* in coming. Some in the wedding party were prepared for this delay, others were not.

And so the message is that we are to be like the wise virgins who are well-prepared for the return of the bridegroom, and to make sure that we are ready to greet the Lord fully awake, with the light of our lamps shining brightly from the oil of love; that is love of God and love of neighbor (as Jesus will explain later in Mt 25). That makes sense. But a more difficult question is: how do we stay ready? How do we make sure that the 'oil in our lamps of our hearts' doesn't run out, and leave us fast asleep, unprepared for the coming of the Lord?

Because this spiritual weariness can happen so easy in our lives, often under the radar. We all have good intentions to serve the Lord. Maybe you volunteer here at the parish, and feel worn out. Maybe you are a stay-at-home mom, and try in vain to be the perfect mother. Maybe your spouse's health is failing, and you struggle to be patient. Whatever your situation, what do you do when you feel like the oil in your lamp has run dry, that you can't give anymore, and you just want to hide from the world and go to sleep? What do you do when you pray and pray, and it seems like Jesus is just never coming to save you?

Well, whatever your trial may be, this time of testing is exactly the time to be more vigilant than ever! One of greatest spiritual dangers we face is a slow descent into what is called *acedia*, or 'spiritual sadness'. When the initial joys of serving God, or a grace-filled retreat, or the honeymoon phase of marriage subside; that is, when love cools down and the sorrows of this life start to cast everything into doubt, this is moment of truth. Will you give in to a life of quiet, drowsy despair, or will you fight to keep the flame of faith alive?

Now it's true, faith is a gift. But we can ask, even beg for more of the Holy Spirit. And even if God seems to be giving only a little, we can refuse to give up and double down on fanning the flame of faith in our hearts. In terms of our parable today, the choice is ours: will we open our hearts and stock up on oil of the Holy Spirit, the author of all spiritual joy, now while there is still time, or will we give into the spirit of the world, and fall asleep?

Now our Gospel today doesn't tell us exactly how to keep these fires burning, so let's look ahead one chapter in Matthew's Gospel to chapter 26. Here, Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the eve of His passion and death. Knowing the agony that lies before Him, He takes His 3 closest friends, Peter, James, and John, to surround Him in prayer, and instructs them: *My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me.* Well, as we know, they fail. They fall asleep, so He tells them again: *Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.* Sadly, they fall asleep again. They fail their best friend in His 'hour' of need, and Jesus is betrayed.

So what can we learn from the failure of the 3 disciples? Well first, Jesus says *remain here*. In other words, we need to *remain with* Jesus at all times. Even if we have a job that seems far from the Lord, we can keep our hearts united with Him by praying on the daily commute, offering little prayers throughout the day, or even something as small as keeping a Rosary in your pocket. We also need to stay with Jesus in our free time: reading Scripture, listening to the Bible or Catechism in a Year, watching a program on Formed, going to weekday Mass, making a good Confession, and Eucharistic adoration—these are all ways of keeping *watch* with the Christ, so as to not fall spiritually asleep.

Even more, we must fight against the pull of those things that dull the spirit: mindless scrolling on our phone, drinking and eating too much, binging on TV shows, unnecessary shopping, etc. Yes, a little rest and relaxation is good for the soul, but we also need to have some penance in our lives to keep the flesh from addiction to pleasure. Because the stakes are high; in fact, they are eternal. So Jesus says, *the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.*

Finally, every Eucharist that we receive is a foretaste of that great Wedding Supper of the Lamb in heaven. But like the foolish virgins in our Gospel today, many folks these days prefer sleep, distraction, and excessive leisure to coming to Mass. Now God is a God of mercy, but our time on earth does eventually run out. We don't know how long we have. Regardless of what we feel in moments of doubt, regardless of what the unbelieving world tells us, all of us will someday see the Lord Jesus face-to-face. He will come to judge the living and the dead. Not everyone who is invited to the eternal wedding feast will choose to attend. Many will be caught sleeping. And so we need to be ready. Are you ready?