

32ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, A
FAILURE TO PREPARE IS PREPARING TO FAIL

*“So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour”
(Matt. 25: 13)*

Have you ever come across this line: “Failure to prepare is preparing to fail”? This statement kept re-echoing as I read through the texts for today’s Mass, especially the Gospel. How aptly it describes the behaviour of the five foolish virgins, who left homes with lanterns but without taking extra oil. The parable of Jesus may seem very unreal and a typical preacher’s story (crafted to deliver a message). But this parable was so true of the lived experiences of the Jews in Palestine of the time of Jesus, and perhaps still true today. It was customary for marriage ceremonies to last at least a week with festivities and celebrations of varying magnitude. Virgins and maidens were expected to keep the bride company until the groom comes, usually on the day and time when neither she nor anyone knows. Often at midnight or the wee hours of the day. Therefore, for the five virgins, who were aware of this custom, to have left without some extra oil for their lamps was a disastrous omission as it indeed turned out. What message can we draw from here?

The core message of the parable is in the last verse of this periscope: “So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour” (Matt. 25: 13). As we gradually draw to the end of the Church’s Liturgical Year, it is only proper that the Church invites us to reflect on the last things about our lives – namely: Death, Judgement, Heaven, Purgatory and Hell. This parable is a reminder of the Last Days and a challenge to enable us to address the question of our preparedness. How prepared are we?

We need the guidance of wisdom for proper preparation. This is why the Church chooses the First Reading (Wis. 6: 12-16), not merely from the Book of Wisdom, but from the portion that speaks so exaltingly about the inestimable value of wisdom in guiding us to navigate the contours of life. Wisdom, here personified as a woman, makes herself available to those who seek it and even presents herself to those who desire her with sincere hearts. Wisdom is a gift of God, the Holy Spirit; freely given to aid our decisions in both human and spiritual affairs. We need to ask for, desire and seek divine wisdom if we are to be able to act like the five wise virgins in the Gospel.

The use of images in this parables is very striking: the two sets of five virgins; the lamps, the oil, the Bridegroom and the Banquet. These are no ordinary picks by the Lord. They are significant and can help us both to understand the parable and how to apply them.

1. **The Virgins:** Virgins signify purity, good works, chastity. So these ten virgins are first and foremost good people, with some qualities in their baggage. These ten virgins represent all good people who do their best to keep themselves pure, obedient to the Commandments and do good. From a different perspective, Jesus employed the image of the five foolish virgins to refer to the Jewish people. They kept the Law of Moses but refused to receive the Messiah, Who came to fulfil the Law (Matt. 5: 17-18); they kept the Law but rejected Christ the Light of the world, The Way, The Truth and The Life” (Jn. 14: 6). The five wise virgins refer to the Gentiles and all those who, hearing the Good News, repented and believed in Jesus Christ; living and loving as He did. Thus, good works in themselves are not just enough.
2. **The Lamps:** Remember the young man who came to Jesus with the question: “Master, what must I do to inherit the kingdom of God”? (Matt. 19: 16). He had kept all the laws. He was a good man. But Jesus told him, “One thing is lacking” (Mk. 10: 21). The Apostle Paul tells us: “If I speak in the tongues of men and angels ... If I had the gift of prophecy ... and if I had enough faith to move mountains ... If I gave everything I had to the poor, and even gave my own body to be burnt, but had no love it would profit me nothing” (1 Cor. 13: 1-3).
3. **The Oil:** Notice in the parable what distinguishes the two sets of five virgins is the oil. It is what makes them wise and foolish, respectively. The oil signifies love, the love of God, Christ and neighbour. This is the missing link in the lives of the foolish virgins. Always, “the greatest is love” (1 Cor. 13: 13). For good works without love is a waste. St. Paul exhorted the Romans, owe no one anything but love; for with love, one has fulfilled the whole Law (Rom. 13: 8). To the Colossians, St. Paul advised that above all virtues, they should put on love (Col. 3: 12-14).
4. **The Bridegroom, The Coming and The Delay:** Of course, The Bridegroom here refers to Christ; The Coming of The Bridegroom refers to the Parousia – the Second Coming of Christ; The Delay in the coming of the Bridegroom relates to the delay in Christ’s second coming, which is a time for repentance; and not the time for us to “grow drowsy and fall asleep” neglecting our obligation of love towards God, Christ, His Son and our neighbours. The final coming of the Bridegroom at “midnight” represents the unexpected timing of the Second Coming of Christ, the Bridegroom. The Banquet refers to the eternal Banquet of the great feast of “rich food, aged wine and choicest meat” (Is. 25: 6). The “closing of the door” is the Last Judgement, after which no one can have any access.

“Give us some of your oil ... There may not be enough for you and us”: One other important lesson of this parable is that we cannot get into the kingdom of heaven

with borrowed credentials. We cannot depend on the efforts of others to have eternal life – there shall be no lending nor borrowing. The rule is that God “will judge everyone as his/her conducts deserve” (Matt. 16: 27; Rom. 2: 6; 2 Cor. 5: 10).

“So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour”: Herein lies the core message for us all: “Prepare! Prepare!! Prepare!!!” We need the Wisdom of God, presented to us in the First Reading (Wis. 6: 12-16) to be always ready; keeping the oils in our lamps full with our lights burning (Lk. 12: 35); with hearts full of the love of God and neighbour.

My dear friends, like the ten virgins, we have all been invited to the great Banquet of eternal life, for it is the will of the Father that none of us is lost. May the Holy Spirit fill us with wisdom that we may always be motivated by love in all we do, think and say until the Coming of Christ. May we never be weary of doing what is good with love. Amen.