

Sermon for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

'Truly, I say unto you, I do not know you.'

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'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.' And indeed, Our Lord's parable is one of wisdom, and of waiting; of dread, and of love.

'For the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.' Who are these virgins? They are those who have remained unstained by the world, they are those who have been *cleansed by the blood of the lamb*, which is to say, they are the baptized. For what is virginity but chastity? And what is chastity but purity? So those virgins are those who have been purified; purged of all their unrighteousness to be made guests of the heavenly wedding feast.

So it is that this parable speaks to the Church, and only to the Church; and the division which the Bridegroom shall make between those whom he knows, and those whom he does not know will be between Christian and Christian, between baptized and baptized.

Are you among the chosen? Does this cause you to be afraid? *'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.'*

'Five were foolish, and five were wise.' For will all enter into the Kingdom of heaven easily? *'It is a pearl of great price,'* and *'narrow is the way that leads to life.'* *'For when the Son of Man cometh, will he find faith upon the earth?'* *'Not everyone that saith unto me "Lord, Lord" shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.'* Therefore, even of that small number that is counted within the church, not all shall be reckoned faithful to the will of *Christ's Father, who is in heaven.* Therefore, *'five were foolish, and five were wise.'*

Are you among the chosen? Does this cause you to be afraid? *'The fear of the Lord*

is the beginning of Wisdom.'

'For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.'

What are these lamps, but the vessel of their own hearts? What is this oil, but faith in the crucifixion of the Christ? For it is this faith *that is a stumbling block to the Jew, and foolishness to the gentile.* *'Yet hath not God made foolish the wisdom of the world,'* for *'the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men,'* even as the weakness of Our Lord is stronger than the power of the devil and all the world. *'For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.'* *'So it pleased God that by the foolishness of preaching, to save the faithful.'* *'That your faith may not stand with the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.'*

For even as priests were ordained in the old age by the anointing of oil, so too now are Christians made by baptism with water, which is the *oil of wisdom.* And what is the special character of a lamp and of oil, but that it burns with fire? This fire is the fire of love, kindled by Holy Spirit which resides in faith; for though we are reckoned *righteous apart from works* yet faith is never apart from love, for it is written: *'They will know you by your love for one another.'* And elsewhere *'Let you light so shine before men, that they may see your works of love, and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.'* For *'though I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am as a sounding brass, or a chiming cymbal.'* And *'though I have prophesy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, yet have not love, I am nothing.'*

For *'faith without works is dead.'*

'As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept.' For death comes to all, the faithful, and the faithless; the loving, and the unloving; the wise and the foolish. *'All are of one place; all are of dust, and all turn to dust again.'*

'But at midnight there was a cry, "Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'

'For we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope [...] The Lord himself will descend from heave with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise.'

'Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps, and the foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise answered saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.'

For one cannot believe for another, and one cannot have faith on behalf of another. But each man must believe for himself, each man himself must let his faith burn in love for his neighbor. *'For it is appointed that each man die once, and face the judgement.'*

'And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut.' *'For apart from faith shall no man be justified.'*

'Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he answered "Truly, I say unto you, I do not know you."

Who are these foolish virgins but those Christians, those of us, who though we attend Church and pray before our meals, though we put on all the outward forms of religion, yet have no faith.

For though outward forms to the faithful are of the greatest glory and help, to the faithless they are hypocrisy and damning in the sight of the Lord, who sees the heart. For *'Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.'*

In this parable the day of the Lord has come; the bridegroom has arrived. To those wise virgins of faith, it is to them as the most joyous wedding feast. But to the hypocrites, *'it is darkness, and not light; as if a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?*

'For the Lord makes no distinction between persons,' 'but judges the heart', whether it cleaves unto the Lord for salvation, or whether it relies on an outward show of religiosity.

The Lord despises such hollow false piety, even as the Prophet Amos declaims:

'I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies, Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen.'

Even as the Prophet Amos declaims:

'I hate, I despise your masses and your Saints Days, and I take no delight in your solemn vespers and liturgies. Even though you offer me your incense and collects, I will not accept them. And the benediction placed upon the people will not be my benediction. Take away from me the noise of your hymns, to the harmonies of your choirs and organs I will not listen.'

'But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.'

Indeed, Christ is righteousness. He is justice. In him is the ever flowing stream of baptism. In him is the *living water which will become to the faithful a well of water springing up unto everlasting life.'*

If one keep the faith until he end, He shall inherit the righteousness of Christ. If you extinguish not the Holy Spirit which was given you in Baptism, you shall wear the crown of glory. Therefore, keep the faith, lest you falter at the coming of the bridegroom.

'This is a hard saying, who can accept it?'

I am sorely tempted at this point to turn this sermon. To 'end on the Gospel' after, what I admit, has been such brutal Law; after so many urgings to keep the faith, to live in love, to let the light of your lamp shine; after so many threats of being shut out of heavenly glory if you are found a hypocrite. Perhaps I should tell all of you that you are the wise virgins, those good virgins, who have kept their oil, who are illumined with the baptismal grace of the burning Spirit of God. Perhaps I should relate what seraphic joys await you inside our Lord's wedding feast; the infinite pleasure of his presence, the unending consolation of his divine love, the completion of your soul within the Spirit of your Lord.

But Our Lord does not leave us with this certainty, not today. He does not

console, not today. For he does not assure his audience that they are wise and not foolish, that they are faithful, and not faithless. No. If I am to be the Lord's voice to you, I must speak as the Lord. He will not give them comfort, for he will not lead them into conceit and complacency, so neither will I with you, my beloved church.

The end of the Church Year is coming. These last few Sundays seek to prepare us with that seriousness which is proper to the coming of the Son of God, that we might *'work out our salvation, with fear and trembling.'* *'Be wise therefore, O ye kings; be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. For blessed are all they that put their trust in him.'*

Trim the wick of faith, ye virgins; light again the oil of Christ's Spirit, that his glory might burn and enlighten your way in this dark night of waiting. Indeed, our bridegroom is coming.

'Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.'

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Sermon Texts: Amos 5:18-24; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13.