

### ***Sense and Stupidity***

In the name of the Church's Bridegroom on whom we wait, dear friends in Christ: the Gospel lesson for today (and indeed, for the next two Sundays) is part of a larger discourse of Jesus known as the "little apocalypse". It likely took place late Wednesday of Holy Week. What sparked it was that the disciples were admiring the noble architecture of the Temple and its surrounding courts and colonnades, which to be fair were truly impressive. In their minds these stately structures of marble trimmed with gold would be the center of the capital of the Messianic Kingdom that they were sure Jesus was about to inaugurate. They imaged themselves seated on thrones helping him to rule over the new Israel from this very place. It thrilled them and filled them with eager expectation. And as they were leaving the Temple precincts for their makeshift camp on the Mount of Olives, they looked back longingly on the grandeur of the buildings they were sure were soon to be their new home and commented to Jesus about the glory of it all. What Jesus said in response absolutely horrified them. He said, "Do you see all these? I tell you that not one stone will be left here upon another that will not be thrown down." Talk about having your bubble burst.

Later, in their camp, the disciples approach Jesus hoping for more explanation. They ask two questions. When will these things be? And what will be the sign of your coming and the close of the age? Jesus replies with the little apocalypse: an unveiling of events to come. He tells them first of the immediate future: how there will be wars, famines, and earthquakes; how many false teachers will arise and lead many astray; how they, the apostles, will proclaim the true gospel to all nations; and how they will be persecuted in the process. He tells them also of Jerusalem's coming destruction and warns them to flee from the city when a certain sign appears. And just as side note here: Jerusalem was destroyed in the year AD 70 and the Christian population escaped because they saw the sign and heeded this warning.

After that, leaving the discussion of Jerusalem's impending doom in the relative near future, Jesus begins to answer the second question about the end of the age. Here he tells them not to expect any sign in particular. Rather he explains that it will be as it was in the days of Noah. People were going about the business of life as usual: buying, selling, getting married, raising families, and all the rest of it. And then one day the rain came, and they were swept away.

But it's not like they were without a witness of what was about to happen. For 120 years Noah was patiently and steadily building the Ark in their midst. All by itself it stood as a silent warning of the destruction by water to come. And Noah too preached to the people of his age that their world was coming to its end. But very few listened. And when the rain came, only seven other human souls were sealed up safely in the Ark with Noah.

It's analogous to the present situation. The world goes on as usual, people are engaged in the normal business of life. And all throughout this doomed planet the Lord Jesus is patiently and steadily building the Ark of his Church which will protect those who by faith are safely inside it not from a flood of water, but rather from fire from heaven and the wrath of God against sinners. In light of this, Jesus stresses the need for those who are faithful to his Gospel to remain at all times ready precisely because the day and the hour are unknown, and they will not be revealed in advance. When the end comes, it will come all at once. And those who are unprepared will be destroyed not just in time but forever in hell.

All of this is lead up to today's Gospel lesson: The Parable of the Ten Virgins – which again stresses the need to be prepared. The story itself is simple enough. Ten young women of marriageable age and who have not yet been betrothed to be married have been invited to attend a wedding celebration. In the first century, these could be fairly lavish affairs lasting up to seven days of feasting, dancing, and playing games. It was also a perfect venue for displaying their womanly charms before potential suitors in a controlled and safe environment. In other words, it was *the* event to attend and *the* place to be. No one would want to miss it.

They have gone out of their village some way to meet the bridegroom. It's their task to join his procession when he appears, and to march with him into the place of the wedding celebration as part of his train. He is to come sometime tonight, but back then they weren't controlled by clocks like we are in our day. Thus, they have taken their lamps – or maybe a better translation is torches, which would be better suited for marching in a parade at night. Either way, they're going to need lights to carry.

Five of the young ladies, we are told, are foolish. The Greek word Jesus uses is the one from which we get the word "moron". It's pretty strong, meant to be offensive. Today we'd say stupid. The other five Jesus says are wise – but the word he uses is not the one we normally translate as wise. This one is more like mindful, thoughtful, sensible; something like that. They've thought this through and have anticipated a potential problem. Thus, they have each carried with them a flask containing extra oil to fuel their light sources when the bridegroom makes his appearance. The stupid girls made so such preparation. To be sure, their stupidity is made evident specifically in their lack of preparation.

Next Jesus says the bridegroom was delayed. And we need to understand that's from the perspective of those who are waiting for him. *They* didn't think he would take so long. The truth is that the groom is exactly on time from his perspective. He comes when he's ready. But due to his taking longer than expected, all ten of the young women become drowsy and drift off into sleep.

The cry comes in the middle of the night: "The bridegroom is here! Come meet him!" The sleepers awake. The sensible and prepared refuel and ignite their light sources. They are ready to go. The stupid and unprepared can't get their lights going. All their fuel is burnt up. They ask the others to share; but they are told no. If the wise were to share, everyone's lights would go out before they made it to the wedding. Go to those who sell and get some oil for yourselves – which is a lot harder than it sounds. They didn't have 24-hour service stations with convenience stores back then.

So, while they're away pounding on the door and trying to wake up the poor guy who sells the oil, the bridegroom comes and leads the procession into his wedding celebration. The door is closed behind them. Inside, a good time is had by all – all those who were prepared, that is. Sometime later the five stupid ones appear. They're pounding on a door again. "Lord, lord, open to us!" And through the closed door they hear the bridegroom's voice without ever seeing his face, "Go away. *I don't know you.*" Those, I believe, will be the most frightening words anyone will ever hear.

The overall meaning of the parable hardly requires explanation. But there are a few features to point out. The bridegroom is clearly Jesus who has promised to return at the end of this age. The wedding feast represents the glory and joy of life with him in his eternal kingdom. It's *the* place to be. And the ten virgins are those who are looking forward to his coming. And

that's important to note: we're not talking about the difference believers and unbelievers here. No, all ten are expecting the bridegroom to appear. They want to go with him into the wedding feast, and they anticipate that they will. But some of them are wrong. They have deceived themselves through their own stupidity and lack of preparedness.

That the bridegroom is delayed (at least from our point of view) we've seen born out in world history. The Apostles of Jesus expected his return already in their day. And so have the faithful throughout the generations since. But he is coming when he's ready. And no one knows the day or hour.

That the ten virgins fall asleep suggests that they die. Their waking is a picture of the resurrection on the last day. Five awake prepared because they fell asleep that way. And five awake unprepared. And one thing you can never do is borrow someone else's preparedness. Each one must prepare for themselves.

And that brings us to the all-important question: what does the oil represent? What is it that having in abundance makes one sensible and not having stupid? For the answer, we can go to a place earlier in Matthew's Gospel. It's at the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus contrasts the difference between the sensible and the stupid. He says, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and keeps and practices them will be like a wise man who built his house upon a rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not keep and practice them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

From this it's clear that the oil is the words and teaching of Jesus. And that makes perfect sense. We are saved by grace through *faith* in Jesus. And if the flame is faith, then the oil is what feeds it and keeps it burning. The thing to see is that it's an expendable commodity. It gets used up over time. And so you have to keep adding to the supply to keep the flame going. That's what being prepared is all about: continuously adding to the supply by continuing to hear, keep, and practice the words and teaching of Jesus. And I'm not talking about just the red letters here, but the words of Jesus found throughout all of sacred Scripture, as well as the Sacraments that Jesus has given to his Church by which faith is fed.

This is what so many nominal Christians do not understand. Many times, I've heard people say things like "You don't have to go to church to be a Christian." It's one of those statements that is technically true but practically false. Yes, you could remain faithful if you washed up alone on an uninhabited island like Tom Hanks in *Castaway*. You could continue to meditate upon the words of Jesus that you can remember – but you know that's going to be less and less over time. Likewise, a person could (theoretically at least) read and meditate upon the Scriptures at home and alone. The trouble is that they don't. They think they've already got enough. That's why they don't come to church where it's being served up and explained. They can't be bothered. And so the flame of faith grows dimmer and dimmer over time. Eventually it goes out. They still call themselves Christian; they imagine that they are. Hey, after all, they still have their names on a church roster someplace. And they still look forward to the Day of the Lord – like the people Amos is addressing in today's Old Testament lesson who want the Day of the Lord to come, only to find out that it won't be what they were expecting. For them it will be condemnation, not salvation. Jesus tells us what he thinks of such people: they're stupid. And make no mistake: the sinful nature in all of us inclines toward this stupidity.

And there is another way in which such stupidity can manifest itself. It's completely possible to be faithful in church attendance, regularly hearing the word and partaking of Holy Communion, and being resistant to it. Or letting it go in one ear and out the other. Or thinking, "This is all very nice. You preach it, pastor. I sure hope that rotten sinner so and so is listening. *But it doesn't apply to me.*" The Word of Jesus comes in, but it all leaks out of your broken flask. You see, it's not enough just to hear the word of Jesus: it needs to be kept, treasured, and *put into practice*. That is to say to remain prepared *you* need to repent. You need to turn from *your* sin. You need to receive Christ's word of forgiveness for *you*. It's said that if Satan cannot destroy you by stealing the Gospel from you or by getting you to deny it, he'll destroy you instead by letting you think that it's all right to go on hating your brother or to withhold forgiveness from him or to be involved in any other ongoing and unrepentant sin. You may call yourself a Christian in such circumstances, but you're only fooling yourself. And like the five stupid virgins you are setting yourself up to hear those frightful words from the mouth of the Lord, "Go away. I don't know you."

So, let me say this as plainly as I can: *don't be stupid*. With the good sense and wisdom that God has given you in Christ Jesus his Son whom he sent to save you by his passion, death, and resurrection, ensure that at all times your flask is filled and that the flame of your faith is burning brightly – burning brightly for others to see your good works that they may give glory to God. And in this way, you will remain prepared to receive the Church's Bridegroom when in his good time he appears. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***