

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 22nd Sunday after Trinity
November 12, 2017

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In understanding Our Lord's parable of the wise and foolish virgins, you won't find a chapter heading on it in the perfect wedding guide! To fully understand our Lord's message we need to make a cross-cultural leap. In ancient Palestine the bridegroom came to fetch his bride from her parents' home and brought her with great ceremony to his own home. The passageway would be lined with well-wishers. And there would be some young women professionally hired to light the way. These girls were not friends or relatives of the wedding party. They were strangers except for the light they carried. And no one would recognize their right to be there if their lamps did not work.

As you may surmise, the Blessed Lord had more on His mind than to pass down to us some ancient Palestinian wedding protocol! In the parable the spotlight is not even on the bride and groom but on these girls hired to carry the lamps. And He tells us some are wise because they have provided extra oil for their lamps. Others are foolish because they have given no thought to the future, or, really, what they are doing. There are different ways to live life, as we all know. The whole human race can be divided up among those who plan for the future while they live now, and those who live only for today. But remember the end of the parable! Those who had provided oil with their lamps gained entrance into the house of the bridegroom while those whose lamps were not burning did not.

The oil in the lamps represents our spiritual resources. Everyone needs to develop these resources. At the most critical times in our lives they cannot be borrowed or bought. These provisions are vitally important. But the Lord does not link their provision with any extraordinary transcendental vision. Rather, our concern for eternal life and our relationship to Almighty God are to be understood as our most practical and down-to-earth job in life. In the parable the wise virgins were simply being practical. They had foresight; they looked ahead and saw that it was in their best interest to carry extra oil. We do not have to assume these girls were any more spiritually advanced than a person planning a trip and who first buys his bus ticket and packs his bags.

All through His parables the Lord gives examples of ordinary and non-heroic people whose spiritual resources were developed for reasons of practical self-

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interest. Cultivating your relationship to Almighty God is a form of opportunism and not heroism. The Lord even gives us the parable of the unscrupulous steward to make His point. This man was a bad business manager and he had been found out. The days of his employment were numbered. With an eye on his bleak future life he decided to curry favor with his employer's debtors but cutting down the amount they owed. Everyone likes half-price! In this way those who owed money would appreciate the lower bill and give this man a job after he was fired. Was he clever? Certainly. Was he dishonest? Of course. But Our Lord says this rascal could teach My saints a thing or two. How I wish they were as determined and practical about their future.

When we call Jesus "Lord of History" that means He know the future better than we know the past. He tells us the future is far more real and important than any of the things which distract us here. Providing for your soul's health is infinitely more important than all the mundane things on this earth. Does it take effort? Yes. Is it impossible to attain? Only the devil wants you to think so. The Son of God gives us the example of these wise virgins to encourage us. Spiritual wisdom is as practical as keeping your lamp operational and making sure you are in the right place at the right time for a wedding. That doesn't sound difficult or heroic. And do not let sincerity be part of the equation. There is no hint in the parable that the wise virgins were of better character or nicer people than the foolish ones. We are only told they were better prepared.

Everything depends on our relationship to Jesus Christ! And so we are told to look for those opportunities and seek them out which promote our being with the Lord. We are to be ready, as a matter of practical self-interest, to seize every opportunity to be with Jesus.