

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 22nd Sunday after Trinity
November 8, 2020

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To rightly understand Our Lord's teaching in the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins we have to make a cross-cultural leap. *Emily Post* books on the perfect wedding are no help! In Biblical times a Palestinian bridegroom went to fetch his bride from her parents' home. With great ceremony he then brought her to his own home. The route would be lined with well-wishers. There would also be some professionally hired people to light the way. These were usually young women or girls carrying lights in the wedding procession. These girls were not friends or relatives of the wedding party. They were strangers except for the light they carried. Remember that point. *No one would recognize their right to be there if their lamps did not work.*

In the telling of this parable God Incarnate had more on His mind than to pass down to us some ancient Palestinian wedding protocol! Anthropologists revel in this stuff. Theologians do not. So we concentrate on what the Lord told us, *and did not tell us*. In the parable the spotlight is *not* on the bride and groom. It is on these girls hired to carry the lamps. *They represent us*. Some of these girls possess wisdom and some are foolish, and the difference is described this way: the wise virgins have extra oil for their lamps. The foolish ones have given no thought for the future, and are careless about what they are doing. As you know, there are different ways to live life. In telling this parable, Our Lord Jesus is asking: "How are you going to live your life?"

The whole human race is found in these two categories of girls. We can be among those who plan for the future while we live now. *Or* we can live for today only. But when the parable ends, those who had provided oil for their lamps gained entrance into the house of the bridegroom. Those whose lamps were not burning did not.

The oil in the lamps represents our spiritual resources. Every one of us needs to develop and maintain this kind of foundation. At critical times in life such resources cannot be borrowed or bought. But notice that the Lord does not link such a necessary provision with any extraordinary and transcendental vision. It is the *secular* world, not the Lord Jesus, which tries to make the spiritual life difficult. Making it appear difficult, the secular world tries to marginalize or

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dismiss faith and thereby discourage us. Almighty God does not do that. He tells us our concern for eternity and cultivating our relationship to Him must be understood as *our most practical and down-to-earth job in life*.

On our dining room table an old oil lamp is lit before we sit down for our evening meal. About once a month, usually in the morning, I check to see if the lamp needs to be refilled with oil. No one would remark that I am being spiritually discerning! It is the same as in the parable. The wise virgins were *simply being practical*. They had foresight; they looked ahead and saw it was in their best interest, as paid professionals, to carry extra oil. It is not necessary to assume these girls were any more spiritually-wired than a person planning a trip and who in advance buys his bus ticket and packs his bags!

All through His parables Our Lord Jesus gives us examples of ordinary, non-heroic, people whose spiritual resources were developed for reasons of practical self-interest. The development is a form of *opportunism*, not heroism. The Blessed Lord even goes so far as to make His point by portraying some disreputable characters. Just last Friday, we had one such example in the parable which was the Mass gospel. This was the story of a bad business manager who had been found out and was about to get his walking papers. He was ordered to give an account to his boss. Looking at his grim future prospects, the manager decided to adjust downwards the invoices of payments owed his boss. Everyone likes half-price! And perhaps some of those who owed money would appreciate the discount and show this bad manager some kindness after he lost his job. Was it a clever thing to do? Certainly. Was it dishonest? Of course. But Our Lord was saying in effect: "This rascal could teach My saints a thing or two. How I wish they were as determined and concerned about their future!"

Spiritual wisdom is as practical as keeping your lamp trimmed and making sure you are in the right place at the right time for a wedding. That doesn't make it sound too difficult or heroic! And be sure to avoid a lack-of-sincerity guilt trip! That is another part of the devil's bag of tricks. There is no hint in the parable the wise virgins were of better character or were nicer people than the foolish ones. We are simply told they were better prepared.

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Everything depends on our relationship to Jesus Christ. So we are told to look for those opportunities which promote our being with Him. We are to be ready, *as a matter of practical self-interest*, to seize every opportunity to be with Jesus.