

The Price Of Oil
Matthew 25:1-13
November 6, 2011

I.

You probably have noticed these booklets in the lobby. They are guidelines on where to go and what to do as a hurricane approaches. This is useful information because we know that a hurricane will come, eventually. We just don't know when. But we want to be ready.

And there is another book here in the church that contains instructions on how to get ready for a different kind of momentous event that we also know is coming, but don't know when. That book is in your pews, right between the prayer books and hymnals. Obviously, it is the Bible.

And just as these hurricane guidelines tell us to get to the physical high ground when the storm comes, the Bible guides us to the spiritual high ground in preparation for that other event.

Today's Gospel reading uses symbolic language to describe that other event. Jesus told a story about a bridegroom, bridesmaids, oil, and lamps, but the meaning related to his coming again in glory to establish God's kingdom on earth. And it describes the rewards of being ready, and the disastrous consequences of not being ready.

II.

On the surface today's Gospel accurately portrays Palestinian life at the time. The groom would take the bride from her family to their new home. During this time guests would gather to await their arrival in anticipation of the banquet to follow.

And the time of arrival was unknown. The bride might have lived in a distant village. The groom might have remained at the bride's home for a while. They might have stopped along the way. Any number of things could have made the time of arrival uncertain.

But this reading is not just a narrative story, it also is full of symbolism. The arrival of the bridegroom represents the arrival of Jesus at the second coming. The wedding banquet represents life in eternity with Christ. The ten bridesmaids represent the people of the church, and the combination of wise and foolish people in it.

And finally, the oil for the lamps represents the fruit of being faithful and obedient Christians. It is the lubricant, refined from our lives, that ensures the way to eternity.

But only five of the bridesmaids brought sufficient oil to keep their lamps lit while they awaited the bridegroom. This symbolically meant that only those five had lived the fullness of the Christian life that leads to salvation and eternity with our Lord.

The other five bridesmaids, the foolish ones, started their journey believing they had enough oil, but ran short. The significance here is that they were not ready for that next step.

Even so, we heard that they left to buy more oil, but when they returned the bridegroom already had arrived and refused to admit them to the banquet. He did not even know them. Jesus closed by saying no one knows when he will return, and the clear message is that once he does, it will be too late for those not ready.

This is evident from the fact that all ten of these women were bridesmaids. All were invited to the wedding banquet and all accepted. All ten wanted to see the bridegroom, Jesus. And their journey to the banquet signified that all ten believed he would arrive. In a contemporary setting they all would have believed they were Christians.

But five of these bridesmaids did not live happily ever after. They might have thought they were in, but ended up being out. Eternal life at the wedding banquet requires more than surface appearances. It requires a conscious effort to follow Jesus' teachings in order to have enough oil.

III.

Now, I realize this line of thought leads to a large unspoken question. What about faith? Isn't that enough? Haven't we been told that faith alone saves us? Paul said in Romans that "We hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" (3:28).

That certainly is true, and today's reading does not challenge that basic teaching. In the end, we are saved by our faith. But what do we mean by the word, "faith?" Can the faith that Jesus calls us to have exist only on the surface. Or must there be something else?

The Bible tells us that faith just naturally causes us to do things that honor God. And if people claim to have faith but do not honor God, then perhaps that kind of faith is not what they think it is. A profession of faith is good, but the words alone could be insufficient. An inward saving faith also is evidenced by other outward and visible things in our lives.

As James, our Lord's brother said, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:17). This does not mean we are saved by works, but if we have true faith, works will be a by-product.

IV.

So, what about people today? We, for example, believe we have faith and that we are good Christians. We anticipate seeing our loved ones in heaven when we die. But someone might ask how we really know. Can we be sure? And is that even the right question to ask?

Perhaps not. A better question could be about our relationships with God and the church, and the priority we give them in our lives. And we probably have a good idea about how we stand with God right now. We know the answer if we are honest with ourselves, and if we don't like the answer there is time to do something about it.

Let's examine that from another angle. We're all aware of these biblical stories about Jesus' second coming. They're in the Gospels, and many of the letters and epistles. The book of Revelation uses incredibly vivid images to describe it. And I urge us not to discount the truth of the message merely because it is described in symbolic or visionary ways.

That truth is Jesus will return at an unknown time, and will fulfill the prophecies revealed at his birth. In that moment we will be called to account for the content of our lives. And we not only read this throughout the Bible, but also say it every Sunday in the Nicene Creed. We will say it as soon as this sermon is over, and might be able to hear it in our minds now.

When we get to the part of the Creed about Jesus we say, "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." Sound familiar? [Repeat]. Then we finish by saying, "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

Those are serious words, taken from the Bible, and I would like to ask two questions about them. They call for a show of hands, but I'm not actually going to ask you to do that. Instead, I ask you just to think about whether you would raise your hands, and why.

The first question is, "How many people here actually want Jesus to come again and establish God's kingdom on earth?" I imagine that just about everyone would raise their hands. We believe that God's kingdom on earth will be a good thing. The Creed says we look forward to it.

Now, the second question is the same as the first, with only one slight addition. "How many people want Jesus to come again and establish God's kingdom on earth . . . right now?"

That question might cause some hesitation. Granted, some people might not want Jesus to come now because of friends or family members who are not yet believers, and they want more time for them to come to faith.

But perhaps others might say, "Wait, Lord, I'm not quite ready. Not so fast. Give me a little time here. I need to do some things. Then you can come, but not now."

What would it mean if anyone had that kind of uncertainty? It might suggest the need to reassess priorities. Perhaps it would signify that they, like five of the bridesmaids, thought they might not have enough oil for their lamps. Perhaps they have good intentions about starting a journey of faith, but have been putting it off.

And we all probably have been there. I know I have. At some time or another we all waver, or doubt, or have questions. And the world does little to help. Secular society encourages us to focus on the here and now rather than the hereafter. We are led to understand God based on personal preference rather than biblical truth.

I'm reminded of St. Paul's words to Timothy as he was preparing the next generation to carry on his work. Paul warned, "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths" (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

V.

This is one of the reasons the church exists; to keep us from wandering away. We believe the church is the body of Christ. St. Paul encountered the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus, and then went throughout the region establishing churches. I see a connection there.

Jesus created the church to continue his teachings, and to perpetuate the meaning of his death and his resurrection. And the ways in which we relate to the church either are examples of the oil of good works of salvation described in today's reading, or else are examples of the failure of the foolish bridesmaids.

So, where is the church in our lives? We probably know the answer. We know whether we attend seriously or casually. We know whether we say the Nicene Creed with meaning or just routinely. We know whether we believe Jesus Christ actually is present in the Eucharist, or whether we think it's just a good idea to take communion.

The church is essential to Christian life. We are called to participate in it and to support it. Those who dismiss the church and believe they can be good Christians without it run the risk of being like the foolish bridesmaids. They just might be out of oil when they need it the most.

And so being ready is the key. We seek to be transformed and reconciled to God. That might occur over a period of time, but it must occur. Jesus does not allow us to cut corners. Faith must be sure and true. And that means it must be lubricated with the oil of Christian love for God and our neighbor that is inherent in today's reading. *Amen.*