

Homily
32OrdA
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St. Bernard Church
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THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH VIRGINS

It's pretty popular these days to think that just about everybody goes to heaven, that there are very few exceptions to this. We tend to think that God is so loving, so forgiving, so merciful, just about all of us will get a pass to everlasting life.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, however, there are 3 passages in which Jesus makes a very clear separation between those who will enjoy eternal life and those who won't. Today's Gospel is the first passage.

So what does all this mean, the bridegroom, the wise virgins, the foolish virgins, the lamps and flasks of oil? What's it all about?

All of the virgins have a desire to see the bridegroom, who represents Jesus. They have that in common, but only half of them brought flasks of oil.

When the foolish virgins asked for some oil from the wise virgins, it seems to us that the wise virgins should have been charitable and shared their oil with those whose oil had run out. Why didn't they?

They did not share their oil because they couldn't share it. The oil was something so personal that they could not give it to another person.

The oil represents an act of self-surrender to Jesus. It represents the willingness of the wise virgins to experience suffering and love and to overcome the many obstacles to their holiness which had been placed in their paths during their lives. Their oil came from the crushing of olives, representing the hardships they had to endure because of their decision to place Jesus first in their lives no matter what the cost.

The obvious paradox is that the lives of the wise virgins would have looked foolish to anyone who looked at them with worldly eyes. The wise virgins would have been the kind of people described by Jesus in the Beatitudes: poor in spirit, meek, pure of heart, peacemakers and persecuted for their faith.

The wise virgins may well have lived lives that seemed lacking in the kind of achievement the world values. They might have seemed almost invisible. But what mattered is what was in their hearts. In their hearts was a deep love for Jesus and a

desire to do nothing beyond God's unique will for their lives. Maybe their lives seemed to be of little consequence but they did everything they believed God wanted them to do.

And so their oil, the gift of their faith, the gift of who they were, was non-transferable. The foolish virgins could not receive the value of the love for Jesus that existed deep in the hearts of the wise virgins.

It's interesting that the Gospel says that all the virgins became drowsy and fell asleep. But as we all know far too well, there are many types of sleep. The wise virgins, unlike the foolish ones, rested peacefully, living out the passage in the Song of Songs, "I slept, but my heart was awake." (Chapter 5, verse 2)

Then the bridegroom, representing Jesus, showed up at midnight. The virgins had no chance to brush their hair, to put on makeup. Their eyes were bleary and their brains were not fully functioning. Jesus saw them just as they were. And that's how He sees us. We can't cover up what we don't want him to see.

So the question really is, for us, "How good is my oil?" "How good is your oil?"

Each of us has a role to play in the Body of Christ. St. Paul says in 1st Corinthians that "God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body."

I cannot live out the life that God planned for one of you. You cannot live the life that God intended for me. But if all of us surrender completely to God and fulfill the plan He has for our lives, the Holy Spirit will link all of our lives together and make of them the most beautiful symphony.

If even one of us decides to be self-centered, to not take Jesus into our heart, to go out to meet the bridegroom without the oil we're supposed to have, the symphony won't be quite so beautiful. And, what is so much worse, those who choose to be like the foolish virgins will miss the beauty and the richness of the adventure that God had planned for them.