

Living in Faith

November 9, 2008

I.

Today's Gospel about the wise and foolish bridesmaids is part of a larger conversation Jesus had with his disciples. It is known as the Olivet discourse because Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives where he was speaking with his disciples about the end of the age.

And throughout this discourse Jesus spoke of his coming again, of final judgment, and of how at that time we all will inherit the consequences of how we have lived our lives, one way or the other.

Today's story paints a picture of that time and, like other parts of the discourse, it can carry a frightening message for contemporary Christians. Today's story tells us that many people who call themselves Christians will find on that last day that they have fallen short in their faith, and like the foolish bridesmaids they will end up on the outside looking in.

And Jesus made this clear in other parts of the Bible. In the Sermon on the Mount he said that "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven (7:21). This means that merely recognizing Jesus as Lord will not be enough. It also will be necessary to have done God's will as well.

Think about that for a minute. This story about the ten bridesmaids is not about five believers and five unbelievers. All ten were followers of Christ. But five of them were locked out and unable to share eternity with our Lord. This reading calls all Christians to think more deeply about themselves, and how they are doing God's will.

II.

Let's look at the reading. On the surface it is an accurate portrayal of Palestinian life at the time. By custom, the groom would go to the bride's home and take her from her family to his home. During this time invited guests and members of the wedding party would gather at the groom's home 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 tarried 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 Gospel reading is not just a narrative. It also is an allegory, and so we must look at it in the context of its allegorical elements. The arrival of the bridegroom represents the arrival of Jesus at the second coming. And the wedding banquet represents life in eternity with Christ. These are key elements of the end of history.

And the ten bridesmaids represent the people of the church, and the mix of wise and foolish people in it. The oil for their lamps, an essential element in the reading, represents the ways in which the people of the church have led faithful and obedient Christian lives. This oil symbolizes all of the good works, and deeds of mercy, and acts of compassion and love and charity that are part of those faithful and obedient Christian lives.

III.

With that background, we now look at what happened in the reading. All ten of these women were bridesmaids. All were invited to the wedding banquet and all accepted. For purposes of the allegory in the reading, that meant that all of them confessed Jesus as their Lord, and all of them believed he was coming again. In a contemporary setting, it is fair to say that all ten would have believed they were Christians.

But only five of them brought sufficient oil to keep their lamps lit while they awaited the bridegroom's arrival. In the context of our allegory, this means that only those five had lived the fullness of the Christian life that leads to salvation and eternity with our Lord. That, as I said earlier, is the true significance of the oil.

Let's go back to the narrative to see what happened next. Five of the bridesmaids, the foolish ones, started their journey believing they had enough oil, but actually ran short and their lamps began to go out. They tried to borrow from the wise bridesmaids who brought sufficient oil, but the wise bridesmaids refused and the foolish ones had to leave to find oil elsewhere.

The foolish bridesmaids eventually returned, but the bridegroom already had arrived, and the bridegroom refused to admit them to the banquet. He said that he did not even know them. And then Jesus departed from the story and told the disciples to keep awake, for they did not know when the second coming would occur.

Now, back to our allegory and Jesus' actual meaning. He meant that the bridesmaids without oil when the bridegroom arrived also were without sufficient faith to gain eternal life in that heavenly banquet with him. And of course, that kind of faith cannot be transferred from one person to another, which explains why the five wise bridesmaids were unable to share their oil.

So we see that five of these allegorical Christians did not live happily ever after. They thought they were in, but they ended up being out. This reminds me of an example I have used before, but it makes the point here. You have heard the old adage that if it looks like a duck, and acts like a duck, and sounds like a duck, it must be a duck. Can we apply that to Christians? If people look like Christians, act like Christians, and sound like Christians, can we assume that they actually are Christians in the true sense of the word?

Apparently not. Today's reading makes that point poignantly clear. Eternal life at the wedding banquet requires more than appearances. It requires action. It requires a conscious effort to follow Jesus' teachings about God's will for us. It requires us to keep awake, as Jesus said. And keeping awake in this sense does not refer to some effort to fight off sleep, but rather to being prepared. And being prepared in the reading meant having enough oil. Being prepared in the world means living a truly Christian life.

Now, before I go further I am compelled to address a large unspoken question. What about faith? Haven't we been told that our faith 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), and Ephesians tells us that "By grace [we] have been saved through faith, and this is not [our] own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works" (2:8-9).

Those words certainly are true, and this reading does not challenge that basic teaching. In the end, we are saved by our faith. But what is the definition of faith? Does the existence of saving faith also imply the existence of good works? Can saving faith exist in the absence of works?

The answer is that good works just naturally flow from faith in spontaneous obedience to God. A person with faith naturally does good works. Faith and works are inextricably linked together. This is because saving faith is a belief that God produces in us in response to our own actions. It is not something that we can create or manufacture on our own.

As a result, if people claim to have faith but do not do good works, then those claims of faith might be questioned. That kind of faith might not be saving faith. As James, the brother of our Lord, said in his Biblical teaching, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:17). Therefore we see that today's reading, which clearly requires the oil of good works to gain admittance to the heavenly banquet, sets forth a standard to which all Christians are called to aspire.

IV.

So, what about ourselves? We all sit here today believing that we have faith, and we think that we have been good and faithful Christians. We anticipate seeing our loved ones in heaven when we die. But how do we really know? Can we be sure? Do we know if we have done enough to ensure our salvation? And is that even the right question to ask?

Probably not. The real question is about our relationships with God and the church rather than a list of our good deeds. And we probably have a good idea about how we stand with God right now. This isn't rocket science. 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 ask ourselves some questions. How do we react to pressures and tensions? How do we treat other people? As we go through our lives during the week, are we concerned only about being successful, or do we also think about being faithful? Jesus gave us the two Great Commandments. Love God and love our neighbors. Do those mandates influence our lives every day, or do we think about them only if the preacher says something about them in church?

And let's look at the church. We believe the church is the body of Christ. That's a serious statement. The church cannot be taken lightly. Jesus intentionally created the church and left it behind to continue his teachings, and to perpetuate the meaning of his sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection. As such, church truly is a holy institution. 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 they are examples of the failure of the foolish bridesmaids.

So, where is the church in our lives? I think we also know the answer to that question. We know whether we attend seriously, or attend casually. We know whether we say the Creed and other parts of the liturgy 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.

And the confession before the Eucharist is an important element of our preparation. There is a moment of silence before we start. Do we actually name our sins before we begin reading the text? And do we really have feelings of repentance that lead to opening ourselves to God? Do we realize that when we partake of the body and blood with a righteous heart we truly have been forgiven for all of our sins and shortcomings and are cleansed in the eyes of God?

The church is essential to Christian life. We are called to participate in it, and we are called to support it. People 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.

V.

Today's reading tells us three things, only one of which we can control. First, the Messiah's coming will be unexpected. Second, we must be ready and prepared to show that the content of our lives makes us worthy to be with the Lord for eternity. Third, we must be prepared to be good and faithful Christians while waiting a lifetime if necessary.

And for us, being ready and prepared is the key. We are called to be transformed at some point in our lives and to be reconciled to God. That change usually occurs over a period of time, but it must occur. Jesus will not allow us to cut corners. He will not allow us to finesse our way into heaven. Our faith must be sure and true. And that means that it must be lubricated with the oil of good works and Christian love for God and our neighbor that is inherent in today's reading. *Amen.*