

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Wisdom 6:12-16 / Matthew 25:1-13)
12.11.2017

In order to understand properly the parable we have just heard there are some points which need to be clarified: first, we must remember that the parable is supposed to describe entrance into the kingdom of heaven. The image of the wedding feast and that of access to the wedding hall speak of our ultimate meeting with God.

Moreover there is an important question which needs to be answered: what does the oil for the lamp represent? What is this reality which conditions our entrance into the kingdom of heaven and which cannot be shared with others?

If the oil is the key to our eternal presence to God, it must symbolise something important. It seems to me that the oil can be nothing less than our personal lives. It is important to be clear that the oil is not a good deed or a particular achievement but the deep orientation we give to our lives, it is the thread which gives meaning to all that we do and say, it is the fuel that keeps us going in life.

So the question we must ask is this: what is our oil? What is the driving force of our lives? Is it money, revenge, fears, bitterness, the desire for power and control over others? Or are we driven by the fruit of the Spirit which is "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5:22-23). Is our lamp bright with Christ's light or is it smothered by the darkness of selfishness and a proud sense of self-sufficiency?

We have to keep in mind that God will not judge us on one mistake, one sin. Our salvation does not hang on one failure but on where our heart leads us, what we really want our lives to be about.

This explains why the sensible bridesmaids were unable to help the foolish ones. The parable is dealing with something which is utterly personal and which cannot be transferred from one person to another.

There is another point which is often misunderstood. At the end of the parable Jesus declares: "So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour".

Yet in the parable, all the bridesmaids have fallen asleep, foolish and sensible alike. Like them, there are times when we all lose our focus in life, when we are not in the best of form. However the lack of oil in the lamps of some of the bridesmaids reveals that these had settled completely into a complacent, lazy and inattentive way of life. The problem for the foolish bridesmaids could be summed up with the famous words that Socrates is supposed to have said at the time of his trial: "The unexamined life is not worth living".

Jesus' call is for us to become aware of what really is at stake in our lives, what is going on at a deep level. The oil disappears when there is an accumulation of days when we do not pay attention to our feelings, when we do not own them and channel them in the right way, when we do not care about the consequences of our daily words, deeds and decisions.

The sleepy life is lived in the slumber of irresponsibility and inattention to one's destiny, to others and to God.

As Christians, sometimes we may be quite prompt to settle ourselves quietly into a survival mode. We do just what is necessary to maintain a light relationship with God and with others, we accomplish the bare minimum required, we skim the surface of life. This kind of mediocrity can keep us afloat as long as things are going smoothly. But we should not be

surprised then when we become overwhelmed in times of crisis, when we are unable to cope with the inevitable difficulties of life: sickness, misunderstandings, betrayals, death...

How can we expect to find the resources, the energy, the strength we need in times of crisis if we do not regularly check the quality of our spiritual life?

A Christian who would never read the Scriptures, never take the time to pray, never benefit from the grace given by the Sacraments of the Church, never reflect with somebody about his or her life, never take part in shared times of worship, never feed his or her faith with good reading, never dialogue with others about faith and society runs the risk to be found lacking in oil for his or her lamp when the Lord comes. Such a life is fragile and in peril, it is like grass, "the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more" (Ps 103:16).

I concede that the last image taken from the book of Psalms is a bit sombre but we have to remember what really is at stake: to have oil and to be ready is about being so grounded and rooted in our relationship with Christ that we are able to withstand all that happens in our lives and in the world. We are called to stand up to all things not as standing stones might do, but as human beings fully alive, open to the promptings of the Spirit and ready for whatever comes our way, without fear and full of trust.

As long as we journey, we can and we must help one another. As members of the Body of Christ, we can support and encourage one another, we can remind one another when we need to recharge our batteries and when our spiritual lives must undergo a check-up. All this is part of the care we must show to one another.

Once we have done that, then at the end, when we will hear the cry announcing the coming of the bridegroom, we must still remember: alone, with our own lives in our hands, we are called to walk toward our Creator holding on to that truth formulated by St Benedict in his Rule: "never despair of God's mercy" (4:74).