

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

On the last Sunday in the church year, we look at the Judgment...but today we are not going to look at the Judgment Day scene itself. Our look today is intended to be more personal. The judgment that I want you to consider this day, in the light of the text, is the one you will face immediately upon leaving this world and the body you now inhabit. They are the same judgment, at least in consequence, but one in which Jesus separates the sheep from the goats is seen as the judgment of all mankind, and this one is deliberately very personal. Our theme is Be on the Alert!

The Gospel lesson is the Parable of the Ten Virgins. In it, five were wise, and five were foolish. We could take every element of the parable and tie it to something and make quite a story out of it, but that would do a disservice to the words of Jesus. He told a simple story with a very simple message, “Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour.” In other words, be prepared.

The problem the foolish young women had in our Gospel is that they were not prepared, at least not for the wait. They did not appear to think beyond the moment, and they did not anticipate what they might need. I suspect that the parable was heard differently when Jesus spoke it, and in the early Church, than it might be today. Back then, they were looking for the quick return of Jesus. The disciples were already eager and impatient for the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth before the ascension. The early Church harboured the anticipation that Christ was going to return soon, and so they sold their property and they often quit their jobs and they hung out together to be ready, waiting and watching for the soon return. The hope was so deeply entrenched in them that when people began to die, physically, some of the earliest Christians began to fear that their loved ones had

missed out on salvation. I know, it seems foolish, given the expectation of the resurrection of all flesh. They had not paid a great deal of attention to that teaching because they were so fixed on the expectations regarding the end. So, they needed to hear this parable as a remedy to their impatience and to understand that the return of Jesus - the Bridegroom - might be delayed until the midnight hour.

For us, the parable is a reminder to be on the alert. Jesus is coming again, and we want to be among those prepared. The oil for the lamps is whatever one needs to be prepared. It is tempting to call it faith and keep the parable simple. Don't misunderstand - faith certainly is something never want to run short of - and yet faith is the gift of God. It is not something we can hoard or create or sustain by ourselves. I suspect that the flame on the lamp would be a better image for faith than the oil.

After studying this text, one thing that I believe the oil represents is doctrine. The early Christians struggled with the wait because they were fixed on their expectations and were not paying much attention to the whole body of doctrine. They thought about the return, but they forgot about all that Jesus taught concerning the wait, and they often just skipped over the teachings about the resurrection on the last day because they so ardently expected to be standing up, still alive and looking into the sky as Jesus returned. And they will be alive and standing, and looking into the sky - it is just that they will be alive again, not still alive.

The result is that when the call comes - or in many cases already came - they were not ready. You see, the call comes when the Lord sends His holy angels to escort you into His heavenly presence. We call that moment when the escort arrives to receive you, “death”. For the child of God, it is anything but - it is death only of the body. The saints

go to live in the presence of the Lord until the moment of the resurrection, at which time they receive their bodies back, resurrected and perfected, and fit for eternal life.

Those who refuse to keep these truths in mind as they wait are often among those foolish ones whose oil runs low. They are found without what they need. They are absent from the company of the saints - the virgins - when the Bridegroom comes.

You need the Word of God. You need to build your life and your values around all that it teaches. We need to be on the alert. The only way to do that is to take seriously what Scriptures teach concerning the life of the Christian and the life of the Church. Is Jesus returning? Yes! But when? There is no way of knowing. We should be prepared for His return in the case that wonderful cry, “The Bridegroom comes, come out to meet Him” comes soon. But we should also be prepared to wait, until death if necessary.

Jesus died for you, and most who are Christians will also need to die for Jesus. Some die in persecutions, and some die in bed of old age, but so far, all have died. When death comes, the cry, “Come out to meet Him,” has come for that individual. Jesus bore the cross for our sins, and He has appointed that those who follow Him will also bear the cross. The trials and troubles and the losses that we must endure should not shake us – after all, the Bible tells us that it will be so.

Another thing you will need is prayer – and this also is the gift of God. And he promises to hear you and answer every prayer. Use that gift often, and in every moment of trouble, fear, weakness – or joy. Pray without ceasing, In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.

Now He invites you to share in the cross. He isn't going to ask most of you to hang on one, nailed through hands and feet. The cross appointed for each of you is the one that fits you. And we have His promise that No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it. You may find yourself wishing at times that the Lord did not have such a high estimate of what you can bear, but His promise is sure. So take heed to all that God teaches. Be prepared for the wait, pray without ceasing, and be on the alert, for the Bridegroom is coming - you just never know the day or the hour that He is coming for you!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.