

**THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH**  
**Sermon for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, 2020**  
**Matthew 25:1-13**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Gospel read before, Matthew 25:1-13: <sup>1</sup> **“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> For, when those who were foolish brought their lamps, they did not bring any olive-oil with them. <sup>4</sup> Those who were wise, however, brought olive-oil in their jars with their lamps. <sup>5</sup> When the bridegroom took a long time, they all became drowsy and began to sleep. <sup>6</sup> At midnight there was a shout: ‘The bridegroom is here! Come out to meet him!’ <sup>7</sup> Then all those virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. <sup>8</sup> Those who were foolish asked those who were wise, ‘Give us some of your olive-oil! For our lamps are going out.’ <sup>9</sup> However, those who were wise answered, ‘No, otherwise there will certainly not be enough for us and for you. Rather, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves!’ <sup>10</sup> While they were going away to buy it, the bridegroom came. The ones who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet, and the door was shut. <sup>11</sup> Later the other virgins also came and said, ‘Lord, lord, open the door for us!’ <sup>12</sup> However, he answered them, ‘Truly, I tell you, I do not know you.’**

<sup>13</sup> **“Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know the day or the hour.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

If you remember, on the first few Sundays in October, we joined Jesus as He taught in the temple only a few days before He died on the cross. Two weeks ago, we broke away from the temple as we celebrated the Reformation. Last week, we observed the Feast of All Saints. Today, we return to the teachings of Jesus on that day He was in the temple.

Jesus had finished His debates with the Pharisees, Herod’s supporters, and the Sadducees, where He had condemned their hypocrisy. Finally, as the day wore on, He and His disciples left the temple. As they were leaving, the disciples looked at the temple and remarked on its majesty and beauty.<sup>1</sup> Jesus used their remarks to warn them about the future destruction of Jerusalem. When they returned to their camp on the Mount of Olives, Jesus continued to teach about the end of Jerusalem, the end of life, and the end of time. The Gospel we heard this morning is one of the parables He used to illustrate the end.

Earlier in the day, while still in the temple, Jesus had compared the kingdom of heaven to a *royal* wedding banquet. In today’s Gospel, we heard Him use the more common *community* wedding celebration as the background for His parable, where the customs were not as lavish as the royal wedding. There were differences between wedding customs back then and the wedding customs of our culture.

Marriages in first century Jewish culture began with two ceremonies. One ceremony began a time called the *betrothal*. We remember that Mary was betrothed to Joseph when the angel Gabriel visited her with the news that she would be with Child.<sup>2</sup> The second ceremony came when the groom and the bride began to live together as husband and wife.

During the betrothal ceremony, the groom and the bride officially became husband and wife, but they did not begin living together. Instead, they began a time of *preparation*. The husband would build and decorate a home for his bride. The wife would gather together the things she needed to set up housekeeping with her groom. This period of betrothal could last more than a year.

After everything was ready, there would be a second ceremony and a great community celebration as the groom and the bride began to live together as husband and wife. The ceremony started at the groom’s home. He would send out a messenger to let the bride know that everything was ready. Then, he would call together his family and friends and form a procession. The procession would proceed to the bride’s home celebrating along the way. If the groom and the bride lived in the same town, this procession would be over quickly.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 13:1

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:27

On the other hand, if they lived in different towns, the procession could be quite an adventure as travel was not as reliable back then as it is today. There were no planes, trains, or cars. While the groom and a few others would ride an animal or use a cart, most of the procession went on foot. Sometimes they would encounter obstacles on the way, so there was no telling when they would arrive at the bride's house. It could be at any time of the day or night.

In the meantime, the messenger would arrive at the bride's home to let the family know that the groom was on his way. Soon all the neighbours would help the bride get ready to travel. The anticipation would build. Everything would be ready and waiting.

Ordinarily, watchmen would stand on the walls of the city, looking for any approaching danger, but now they had the joyful duty of watching for the groom. Day and night, they would scan the horizon looking for his procession. Eventually, the shout would go up, "The groom is here!" Then the bride's family and friends would join the procession.

Now the process is reversed. Once the groom had arrived, and the bride was ready, the entire community would accompany them in a grand procession to their new home. There they would celebrate the beginning of this new family for about a week. No one in the community would miss it.

This is the culture into which Jesus told the parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins. All ten virgins were part of the community who wished to celebrate the beginning of a new family. At first, all ten of them were ready for the arrival of the groom. They "**took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom**." However, in this instance, Jesus said that "**the bridegroom took a long time**." As we mentioned earlier, travel was unpredictable, and delays were the rule rather than the exception.

The delay of the bridegroom separated the wise from the foolish. The wise were prepared. They had "**brought olive-oil in their jars with their lamps**." They had plenty of extra oil for their lamps. Not like the foolish: they "**did not bring any olive-oil with them**," and so, their oil supply ran out. The wise virgins went and joined the community in grand procession to the new home. They went in with the bridegroom "**to the wedding banquet, and the door was shut**." The foolish were not ready, and so they missed out.

Jesus had given many warnings on that day. He had warned about the wicked tenants who killed, not only the servants but even the son of the landowner.<sup>3</sup> He had warned of the wedding guest who refused to wear the clothing provided by the king.<sup>4</sup> He had warned of an evil son who promised to work in the vineyard, but did not.<sup>5</sup> All these parables illustrated the warning. God had offered His free gift of salvation and the people who should have known better rejected it.

In real life, the wise are those who *fear the Lord*. The wise are those who examine their lives in light of the Ten Commandments and find themselves lacking. The serious nature of their sin terrifies them. They know that they do not have enough in themselves to work their own salvation. They know that their only hope for salvation must come from elsewhere. It must come from God.

The fools believe that they are sufficient to themselves. Salvation lies within. Self-esteem, confidence, positive thinking: these are the things that bring salvation. These are all things that we can produce in ourselves. We need nothing extra. We need nothing outside of ourselves. A little bit of self-improvement: a little bit of elbow-grease: that's all it takes. We can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We can be winners.

Even those today who follow false religions still rely on themselves. Buddhists are taught to walk the eight-fold path and follow the middle way. Muslims must keep the five pillars. The Baal worshippers of the Old Testament drew their own blood to get the attention of their false god. Even when you believe in a false god, that god gives you things to do to earn salvation. Your salvation still depends on you. You are still a fool.

Not so the wise. The wise one believes in the God who has loved the world by giving "*His only Son, that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). The wise believe in the God who earns salvation Himself and then gives it freely. The wise one has salvation that *does not* come from within. Instead, the wise one has salvation that comes from God in the person of Jesus Christ.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us of reality when he says, "*it has been appointed for human beings to die once, but after this the judgment*" (Hebrews 9:27). At the time of death, the wise person trusts the One who has taken on

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 21:33-39

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 22:1-14

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 21:28-31

humanity and died on the cross. The wise person knows that the Lord God who has died also rose from the dead and lives forever. The promise of that is certain. The wise one is ready.

The fool suddenly becomes wise when death strikes, but by then, it is too late. The fool suddenly realises he has nothing. At death, he learns who the true God is, but by then the door is shut. There is no entry to eternal life. The fool is lost forever.

We must not be so foolish as to believe that we are sufficient in ourselves when it comes to our salvation. The good works we perform simply flow out of confidence in and thankfulness for our salvation *already* gained by Jesus Christ. That is what it means to be wise. We love our neighbour because Christ loves us.<sup>6</sup>

The wise one rests in God. God sends the Holy Spirit to fill us with the Gospel. The Gospel that we hear, the wet Gospel of Holy Baptism, and the Gospel consumed in the body and blood of Jesus. It is by these Means of Grace that God keeps us ready. It is by the Means of Grace that we are like the wise virgins who had the oil they needed.

The devil, the world, and even our own sinful flesh use us up - empty us out. If we rely on the flame within, we rely on nothing. Instead, the Holy Spirit *calls us by the Gospel, enlightens us with His gifts, sanctifies and keeps us in the true faith*. In this way, He supplies us with all we need for eternal life. We are like those **“who were ready”** and **“went in with him to the wedding banquet.”** Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

#### PRAYER FOR THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Almighty God and Father, in wisdom You have made the world and all things, seen and unseen. We praise You for the gift of life, for the wonderful creation of our bodies, for our moral and spiritual capacities, and for the marvellous gifts of intelligence and reason. But, above all else, we thank and praise You for the gift of faith, by which we know You and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent. We praise and worship Him for showing us Your great love by dying the death that enables sinners to live for ever. We praise You for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who has brought us to faith in Jesus, and has changed our hearts from rebellion against You to love and praise for You.

In mercy, pour out Your Spirit on us anew each day, so that our love, knowledge, and spiritual power may keep on growing, and our lives may be filled with the truly good qualities that only Jesus Christ can produce. Lead us by Your Spirit to love one another with brotherly love, and to forgive one another as You have forgiven us for Christ's sake.

Keep Your church in the true fellowship of the Gospel, that it may stand firm in the faith. Protect it against all its enemies, that it may serve You freely. We remember in particular those of Your children who are being persecuted because of their faith. Uphold them by Your Spirit, and give them patient endurance, that they may witness to Your saving power. Move those who oppress them to turn to You. Free Your people from all falsehood and error, and lead them along the road of truth and godliness.

Fill the leaders of the nations with Your light, and dispel the darkness of sin and spiritual ignorance. Lead people everywhere to enjoy peace and happiness as they learn to love and follow You. Give wisdom and strength to all in authority in our country, that they may serve according to Your direction, and our people may live in unity and uprightness. Frustrate the schemes of the wicked, and further the efforts of the godly.

Move parents to sow Your Word in the hearts of their children, that the young may be raised in the ways of Christ and live lives that are a blessing to church, country, and mankind. Give parents the understanding and patience they need for their God-given responsibilities.

Watch over the sick, the sad, and the troubled. Stand by them in their sufferings, and help them in all their burdens. Protect all who are in any danger of body or soul, and save them by Your wise love. Help us in all times of need to look to You for pardon, peace, and healing.

These, and all other things that we may need, give us for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> 1 John 4:19

**23 Pentecost (Proper 27)**

Amos 5:18-24

<sup>18</sup> How horrible it will be for you who are longing for the day of the LORD! Why would you have the day of the LORD? It will be darkness and not light. <sup>19</sup> It will be like a man who runs away from a lion, only to have a bear confront him. It will be like a man who goes home and rests his hand against a wall, only to have a snake bite him. <sup>20</sup> Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, rather than light? Will it not be very dark, with nothing bright in it?

<sup>21</sup> "I hate your feasts and despise them. I cannot stand the stench of your festive assemblies. <sup>22</sup> Although you offer burnt offerings and your grain-offerings to Me, I shall not accept them. I shall not accept favourably the peace-offerings of your fattened steers. <sup>23</sup> Take away from Me the noise of your songs! I shall not listen to the music of your harps! <sup>24</sup> Rather, let justice flow like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

<sup>13</sup> Fellow-Christians, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, that you may not grieve like the others, who have no hope. <sup>14</sup> For, since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, we believe that even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. <sup>15</sup> For this we tell you by the Word of the Lord, that we who are still alive, who are left until the Lord comes, shall certainly not arrive ahead of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>16</sup> For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead who are in Christ will rise first. <sup>17</sup> After that, we who are still alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so we shall always be with the Lord. <sup>18</sup> Therefore, comfort one another with these Words!

Matthew 25:1-13

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