

Keep your inner lamp aglow

Thirty-second Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – November 8, 2020

Readings: Wis 6:12-16; 1 Thess 4:13-18; Mt 25:1-13

“... *the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps*” (Mt 25:4)

Prologue: Oil and lamp are rich biblical symbols. ‘Oil’ appears over 200 times and ‘lamp’ some 100 times—with many meanings: sacred, secular, literal, liturgical, figurative, symbolic, etc. Lamp can be used for our reflection today, since the gospel has the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids with lamps either aglow or spent, and able or unable to enjoy the wedding feast.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Since the liturgical year is drawing to a close and we will soon begin the season of Advent, the mood of today’s liturgy is eschatological, namely, expressive of the end-times. The message running through all the readings is: “*Be wise! Be awake! Be prepared!*” Since the image of oil and lamp appear in the gospel reading, one can begin with reflecting upon the significance of the ‘parable of the ten bridesmaids’. The parable can be interpreted from different perspectives. For instance, at a simple, surface level that can be considered ‘allegorical’, one can equate the bridegroom with Jesus, his coming as the end-time, the wedding feast as the heavenly, Messianic banquet, the bridesmaids as the good or bad Christians, the closed door as acceptance into heaven or rejection and so on. However, trying to draw parallels with each detail of the parable is unhelpful, since our knowledge about details of wedding feasts in Jesus’ time is limited. Thus, for instance, commentators are at a loss to explain whose house the bridegroom was entering where the wedding feast was taking place, and the role of the bridesmaids who should have been accompanying the bride and not waiting for the bridegroom! Thus, proceeding deeper than merely seeking parallelisms, we could focus our attention on the *inner disposition* and *attitude* of those invited for the wedding—here, the bridesmaids—who seek to enter the ‘kingdom of heaven’ since Jesus narrates the parable in the context of the kingdom, as follows:
2. Among the many meanings of ‘lamp’ in the Bible there is the aspect of ‘*inner illumination*’, as seen in Proverbs 20:27: “The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord that sheds light on one’s inmost being” and in Job 18:6: “The light is dark in their tent, and the lamp above them is put out” — the latter referring to evildoers who experience inner darkness. Therefore, in this parable, one can think of the kingdom of heaven as an *inner ‘God consciousness*’, so to say, that bears fruit in outer commitment. In other words, external actions should always be an overflow of internal awareness. Here, the wise bridesmaids are fully aware of the importance of the event and leave no stone unturned to ensure that they are, indeed, worthy of the honour of being chosen, specially invited, and expected to walk into the wedding hall to eat, drink, sing and dance. The lamps are indispensable since, besides brightening up the procession, they will enable the bridesmaids to see the bridegroom and vice-versa. In the mutual seeing, they will recognize each other. However, this initial seeing and later rejoicing depend on one condition: lamps with sufficient oil. The marriage party is delayed, as is understandable on big occasions; and “all of them”—wise and foolish—“became drowsy and slept” (v.5). But, at the darkest moment, *midnight*, a cry pierces the night: “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!” (v.6). One will surely sleep (like all other human beings do); but one must be prepared internally and externally when God calls.

3. At first sight, the wise bridesmaids seem selfish by not sharing the oil in their flasks and by advising the unwise: “you had better go to the dealers and *buy* some for yourselves.” But rather than displaying their selfishness, they are revealing their wisdom, for it’s time to tap inner resources: their flasks full of oil! One must store up oil—for massaging, healing, lighting, heating, cooking, anointing, etc.—as a resource that comes handy as and when needed. Sadly, the only way the foolish are used to deal with emergencies like the present one is from ‘*outside*’: by *going* out and *buying*. This is the same line of action that Jesus’ disciples suggest when faced with feeding the five thousand. They want the masses to “*go* into the villages and *buy* food for themselves” (Mt 14:15). In Mark’s gospel, too, when directed to provide for feeding the people, the disciples ask Jesus: “are we to *go* and *buy* two hundred denarii worth of bread?” (6:37). Also note that when Jesus is drawing out the inner resources of the Samaritan woman, “his disciples had gone to *buy* food” (Jn 4:8). By contrast, Jesus directs everyone to tap their *own resources*. The foolish always look *outside* and run *to buy*, while the wise look *inside* and tap whatever is pure *gift*, free *grace*. Finally, after the wedding hall’s door is shut, the foolish women return, saying: “‘Lord, lord, open to us!’” (v.11), only to be told: “Truly I tell you, I do not know you” (v.12). Interestingly, Matthew uses these same expressions in chapter 7:21-23 for those who say, “Lord, lord ...” but do not do the will of God. They too will be told, “I never knew you; go away!” In an extended sense, the oil can also be interpreted for us, Christians, as the ‘*Christ consciousness*’ which is fruit of being *anointed*; yet, that requires deep inner awareness.

Linking the First and Second Readings to the Theme of Inner Light and Preparedness

The first reading exhorts us to seek wisdom, which is basically an intimate ‘*knowing God*’ and not mere knowing ‘*about*’ God. Here, Wisdom is personified as a woman who, on the one hand, is readily “discerned by those who *love* her, and is found by those who *seek* her” (v.12); and, on the other hand, “she goes about *seeking* those worthy of her, and she *graciously appears* to them in their paths” (v.16). The dual dimension of activity and passivity is present here: one’s inner self ought to seek to love and serve God; and likewise, God’s Spirit graciously seeks to be in communion with the one who loves, seeks and serves.

The second reading contains end-time language that might seem strange today. Paul thought that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent and provided apocalyptic imagery like God’s trumpet blasts, the voice of the archangel, the opening of graves and the taking up of all people into the clouds. Such imagery should not distract us from the main theme, i.e., “We shall live with God forever!” Paul wishes to tell the Thessalonians: (a) Do not grieve for the dead since, unlike those who don’t believe in Christ, we have hope in being raised up; and, (b) our hope is not only anchored in Christ as individuals, but ours is a corporate hope, a communitarian faith.

In Lighter Vein: A man knocks at the door of a house. A voice from inside inquires: “Who knocks?” The man replies, “It’s your countryman!” The voice from within replies, “Go away; this house will not hold you and me.” Disappointed, the man travels around for a year and knocks a second time. The voice from inside asks: “Who is it?” The man replies, “I’m your brother!” The voice says, “Sorry! There’s no room for you.” Desperate, the man spends a couple of years more, reflecting upon the replies he is receiving. He returns a third time and knocks again. The voice from inside asks, once again: “Who is it?” The man replies, “It is *you!*” The door opens. My door will be open and my lamp lit only when the distinction between Christ and me disappears. So, I pray: “Give me oil in my lamp, Lord, keep me burning!”
