

Homily for Friday of the 21st Week of Ordinary

1 Corinthians 1:17–25
Psalm 33:1–2, 4–5, 10–11
Matthew 25:1–13

There's a true story that comes from the sinking of the Titanic. A frightened woman found her place in a lifeboat that was about to be lowered into the raging North Atlantic. She suddenly thought of something she needed, so she asked permission to return to her stateroom before they cast off. She was granted three minutes or they would leave without her.

She ran across the deck that was already slanted at a dangerous angle. She raced through the gambling room with all the money that had rolled to one side, ankle deep. She came to her stateroom and quickly pushed aside her diamond rings and expensive bracelets and necklaces as she reached to the shelf above her bed and grabbed three small oranges. She quickly found her way back to the lifeboat and got in.

Now that seems incredible because thirty minutes earlier she would not have chosen three oranges over the smallest diamond. But death had boarded the Titanic. One blast of its awful breath had transformed all values. Instantaneously, priceless things had become worthless. Worthless things had become priceless. And in that moment she preferred three small oranges to a crate of diamonds.

There are events in life, which have the power to transform the way we look at the world. Jesus' parable about the ten virgins offers one of these types of events, for the parable is about the Second Coming of Christ. But Jesus doesn't come right out and say this. Rather, he lets the story describe it for him. The woman on the sinking Titanic understood, in the light of her current circumstances, that she must make preparations for living on a lifeboat. Diamonds would not suffice, only the precious resources of an orange were good enough. Likewise, in this world where Christ may return at any moment, the parable warns, we must be ready by exercising works of charity.

The parable of the Ten Maidens emphasizes the need for watchfulness (25:13). Its story line centers on a Jewish marital custom: following the period of betrothal, the groom would lead a procession to bring his new wife to their home, and they would celebrate a week-long banquet with family and friends. Here the bridegroom (25:6; 9:15) arrives to begin the joyous procession and take his wife to the marriage feast. Unprepared and without oil (25:3), the foolish maidens are excluded from the celebration while the wise participate fully. Likewise we are to be prepared because the hour of our death and the hour of the Second Coming are unknown to us.

The lamp is Christian faith, while the oil represents good works; thus faith without works is useless as we read in James 2:17. Souls must prepare for their personal encounter with Christ

(bridegroom) by loving God and neighbor, the theme that Jesus will address in the rest of Matthew 25.¹

When the parable is read in the light of Matthew's Gospel as a whole, there is a clear correlation between the oil and the performance of good works. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus compares good deeds to the light of a lamp:

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.²

Later in the same sermon, Jesus speaks about the professed Christian who says, "Lord, Lord," but who fails to do the will of the Father (7:21). His response to such a one will be, "I never knew you" (7:23), a statement nearly identical to the groom's response to the foolish virgins: "I do not know you" (25:12). Echoes such as these within the Gospel make it likely that Jesus intended the oil to represent good works willed by the Father.

The parable thus urges disciples to persevere in good works. It is one thing to make a strong start in the Christian life, to believe in Jesus and to commit oneself to repentance the theme introduced in Mathew 4:17 when Jesus says:

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."³

But this commitment must be sustained over time. There is the danger that a believer may grow tired of doing good (see Gal 6:9). One's enthusiasm for works of righteousness can run out (see Rev 2:5). Every disciple is offered the grace and opportunity to continue in good works, to acquire the oil that he or she will need when the Lord returns. Only those who do so will be recognized by the bridegroom and welcomed into the nuptial celebration of the kingdom.⁴

The values Jesus says are most important seem to the world foolishness, as Paul says in today's Epistle. It is only those who recognize that we are all in the same boat that is leading to death and judgment who can then realize life is to be lived expectantly is exercising the good works of charity who will be ready to welcome the bridegroom Jesus when he comes.

¹ Mitch, C. (2010). Introduction to the Gospels. In *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The New Testament* (p. 53). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

² *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Mt 5:16). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

³ *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Mt 4:17). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

⁴ Mitch, C., & Sri, E. (2010). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 321). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.