

In the name of one God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.

There is a dream that I've had several times since my ordination. Every time the details are slightly different than they were in previous versions (I'm in a different place, there are different people around), but it is always a very vivid dream and I always wake up with a feeling of anxiety after I have it. The last time it involved our having a major service here, at St. John's. Bishop High was here – in fact there were other bishops here. I don't know who they were or why they were here – but suffice to say, my day in the dream was not going well. The Bishop was wearing his vestments, his cope and miter and had his crozier in hand. In other words, he was ready to process into the church. I had on my white alb, but couldn't find my stole. As I rushed around trying to find a stole – any stole – to put on, I discovered that I also didn't have my prayer book. Mentally I decided, "Well, I'll just make do without the prayer book, but I've got to have a stole." It was then that I noticed I was barefoot – and I had no idea where my boots or socks were. As the Bishops started to process into the church (oblivious to my predicament) I woke up.

I generally have a dream like this before Holy Week, or Easter or Christmas; those times when there are lots of details to attend to and subconsciously I'm concerned that one or more will be overlooked. Psychologically, this is not an uncommon dream and its

source is pretty obvious – it has to do with getting anxious about the possibility of being ill prepared for a coming event. That’s what today’s Gospel is all about.

Jesus’ parable of the 10 bridesmaids is a story about preparedness. In the Israel of Jesus’ time, weddings were a really big deal. If you think that the phenomenon of throwing huge, never-ending wedding celebrations is a new one, you’d be wrong. In Jesus’ day weddings were a reason to break from the humdrum of every day village life. It was a time when friends and relatives from far and wide would come to share in the joy of the festivities. And because people had so far to travel, and travel itself was so difficult, the wedding celebration went on for days, with people coming, staying, and going as they needed. But one of the highlights of the festivities was when the bridegroom came in the night to take his bride from her father’s house and carry her back to his house – to their new home. When the bridegroom came, his way would be lit by the unmarried women – the bridesmaids – of the village, who would all hold oil lamps for the bridegroom to see where he was going.

The story we just heard is one of Jesus’ parables that is actually more allegorical than parabolic – meaning that there are elements of the story that can be directly assigned to other people or things. The bridegroom in this story is Jesus. The wedding feast is the Second Coming – Jesus’ triumphal return to earth; the time when all humankind will be subject to the judgment of Christ. And the bridesmaids are us – those who will be prepared and those who will not.

This story appears in the middle of a long speech, or discourse, that begins in the 24th chapter of Matthew and continues until the Last Supper and the beginning of the passion narrative in chapter 26. In this discourse, Jesus prepares the disciples for his departure from them by explaining that He will return at the end of time, on the last day, when He will appear with lightning across the sky, “on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”

The parable of the ten bridesmaids, along with next week’s parable of the talents and the following week’s discussion of separating the sheep from the goats are all one big piece of teaching for Jesus. He wants the disciples to understand that part of their vocation; part of their calling is to be ready for the Second Coming. Part of the message they are to take out to the world after Jesus’ ascension into heaven is that Christians need to prepare for Jesus’ return.

This allegory of the bridesmaids tells us a couple of things about being ready. First is, we have absolutely no idea when Jesus will return so constant preparedness is the order of the day. In Matthew 24, Jesus tells the disciples that there will be “wars and rumors of wars,” there will be floods and famine and all sorts of calamity before His return. Many people today point to current events and tell us that the time is near. That may be true, but it’s not the reason that Jesus told the disciples what He did. He is not trying to give them secret clues, turning scripture into a puzzle that the clever can figure out. No ... it’s exactly the opposite of that. Jesus is saying, “all of these things happen

and they are necessary, but you cannot tell the time of the Second Coming any more than you can predict the exact day that the trees will bud.” Only God knows the timing. So ... *always* be ready.

The second thing to take from this allegory is what happened to the foolish bridesmaids when they discovered that they didn't have enough oil. They asked the other bridesmaids for some of their oil. After all, they were all involved in the same celebration. They were all waiting for the return of the same bridegroom. They were all members of the same village, the same community. So it only made sense that those with enough oil would share with those who had too little. Jesus' hearers must have been thinking of the feeding miracles they had seen during Jesus' time on earth. They must have been thinking, “of course. They will all pool their resources, offer them to God and then there will be enough.” But that's not Jesus' point at all.

The oil in this story is not a worldly resource that people need to survive, like bread, fish or water. The oil in this allegory is the righteousness of the bridesmaids. It is righteousness that Jesus says we need to be prepared with, before He comes again. We can be really anxious to see Jesus again. We can go to bed as excited as children on Christmas Eve, anticipating His triumphant return, but unless we are prepared as righteous people, we will be sorely disappointed. You see, righteousness is something we cannot pool or borrow. It is something we have to have, something we have to

develop on our own. The twentieth century Scottish theologian, William Barclay, put it this way,

This text warns us that there are certain things which cannot be borrowed. The foolish virgins found it impossible to borrow oil, when they discovered they needed it. A man cannot borrow a relationship with God; he must possess it. A man cannot borrow a character; he must be clothed with it. We cannot always be living on the spiritual capital which others have amassed. There are certain things which we must win or possess for ourselves, for we cannot borrow them from others.

I think Barclay had a good sense of Jesus' vision of righteousness. Unfortunately, today when we think of righteousness, what we are really thinking of is *self*-righteousness; that aura that some folks put off, that they're better Christians (indeed, better people) than we are because of what they do or how they live. That is NOT the righteousness that Jesus had in mind. Barclay talks about our relationship with God and our character. That's what righteousness is really about.

We can do good works all day long and have a horrible relationship with God. And we can have good character traits; honor, truthfulness, generosity, love, and have no relationship with God at all. But those are the exceptions. As we read in St. Paul, works without faith are hollow. And to paraphrase St. James, show me someone with faith and I'll show you someone who does works. Our character and our relationship with God are intertwined. We need both to be whole. And both require work on our part.

Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus preached and taught about repentance – the turning away from the ungodly and back toward God. Jesus again reminds the disciples about such repentance in the parable of the bridesmaids. Be prepared, He says. Always be prepared.

We can be consistently – constantly – prepared for the return of Our Lord, by repenting those things we do that separate us from the love of God in Christ. We can be constantly prepared by developing a character of loving, giving service, caring for others before we care for ourselves; by feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless; giving drink to the thirsty; visiting the ill and the captive – in other words, loving our neighbor. And we can have a relationship with God through worship, prayer and seeking God's will in listening for God's voice. If we put the building of the Kingdom of God first in our lives, if we live our lives like we are God's servants every day – not trying to build ourselves up in the eyes of others, but rather giving all that we have to the glory of God's Kingdom – we will live lives of readiness, preparedness. And we will have no reason to fear – no reason to dream of being unable to find our shoes at an important moment – because the bridegroom *knows* if the bridesmaids are ready. Amen.