

There is an old legend about a man who had a rather stupid servant. He was very young and worked for the master for nearly five years. The master's frustration with the servant grew each year. One day in a fit of frustration he said to the servant, "You've got to be the stupidest man I've ever met. Look, I want you to take this staff and carry it with you. If you ever meet a man more stupid than you are, give him the staff." Then he dismissed the servant. The servant carried the staff with him wherever he went. Often out in the marketplace, he'd meet some pretty stupid people. But he was never sure they were worse off than he. Years passed with the servant carrying his staff.

Then one day he came to know that his old master was dying and, therefore, went to the castle to see him. His master was quite sick. In the course of their conversation, the master said, "I'm going on a long journey." The servant said, "When do you plan to be back?" The master said, "This is a journey from which I'll not return." The servant said, "Sir, have you made all the necessary preparations?" The master said, "No, I have not." The servant said, "Could you have made preparations?" The master said, "Yes, I guess I had time in my life, but I've been busy about other things." The servant said "Master, you're going on a journey from which you'll never return! You could have prepared for it, and you just did not?" The master said, "Yes, I guess that's right." The servant took the staff he'd carried so long and said, "Master, take this with you. At last I've met a man more stupid than myself!"

Telling us the parable of the 10 virgins in today's gospel, Jesus warns us to be ever prepared to meet him as our judge.

The gospel passage of today is situated in the context of a discourse on the end of times and the second coming of Christ. After talking about the destruction of the Temple and the end of the age, the Evangelist takes up the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. The early Christians expected the second coming of Christ in their lifetime. Some even quit their jobs, expecting the imminent return of Christ. They thought that those who had died before the coming of Christ would not be saved. So, Paul in the second reading of today makes it clear that the power of Christ's death and resurrection can save even those who have already fallen asleep. As we draw near to the end of the liturgical year, we are reminded through the readings that Christ will come any time. And therefore the question is, "Are you ready for the Lord?"

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins is told against a cultural background that is so different from ours today. Knowing the Jewish wedding customs in New Testament times might help us to understand the



story better. On the wedding day, the bridegroom and his friends would go to fetch the bride from her family. The ceremony took place at night, so the bridegroom's party would usually set off to arrive at the bride's sometime after sunset.

Meanwhile, the bride and her bridesmaids awaited the arrival of the bridegroom and his party.

Upon their arrival, the bridesmaids would join the party as they escorted the bride to her groom's family where the party would take place. Because the bridegroom might come to the bride's house unexpectedly,

the bridal party had to be ready at any time, with virgins carrying lighted torches and reserve oil in jars. Five of these virgins, who could not welcome the groom's party, lost their chance to take part in the celebration. They lost not only the opportunity of witnessing the marriage ceremony, but also of participating in the week-long celebration that followed.

The bridegroom is Christ and the bride is the Church. The bridesmaids are the members of the Church. The lamp represents our faith, and the oil is our spiritual and charitable works. Faith without good works is dead. The foolish virgins represent those who fail to prepare for the end of their lives. What matters is not the occasional or the last-minute burst of spiritual fervor but habitual attention to one's responsibilities toward God.

Let us be sure that our Lamps are ready for the end of our lives. Spiritual readiness, preparation, and growth do not just happen. These come as a result of intentional habits built into one's life. We cannot depend on a Sunday morning service to provide for all our spiritual needs. Just as we need physical discipline, we also need spiritual discipline. These disciplines include taking time for prayer and being alone with God; reading God's Word; frequently receiving the sacraments with devotion, especially the Eucharist and Confession; acts of service to others; moral faithfulness and loving obedience; and spending time with other Christians for mutual prayer, study, and encouragement. These are the things that enable a person to grow in Christ and to be prepared for Christ's coming, as well as to overcome the normal difficulties of life. Without these things, we will not be prepared, and that preparation cannot be hit or miss, nor can it be postponed. We cannot procrastinate, lest we leave it until too late.

A tour group was in the elevator going to the top of the Empire State Building. At about the 102nd floor, a woman asked the tour guide, "If the cables on this elevator break, do we go up or down?" The tour guide answered, "Well, that depends on how you are living."

If not sooner, the Lord will come in the moment of our death. So let us not put off until tomorrow what can be done today. Let us be ready when He comes.