



THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS



The Parables of Christ

POPE SHENOUDA III

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HIS HOLINESS POPE SHENOUDA III

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CONTENTS

	Page
The Parable.....	5
The Number Five.....	6
Wise and Foolish.....	7
Virgins.....	10
The Oil.....	11
Our Lamps are Going Out.....	14
The Door Was Shut.....	17
I Do Not Know You.....	19

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins

Matthew 25:1-13

“Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.

“And at midnight a cry was heard: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’ Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.

“Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ But he answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.’

“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming”.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins

The Sovereign Lord said, *“Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish”* (Matt.25:1,2).

THE NUMBER FIVE

The number five in fact symbolises man (mankind), and hence, the five wise virgins symbolise all the wise among men, and the five foolish virgins symbolise all the foolish among men. Saint Augustine mentioned that man is distinguished by his five senses, and five fingers on each hand and five toes on each foot.

We often find the number five mentioned in matters relating to mankind. In the most well-known miracle of feeding the multitudes, the Lord satisfied them with five loaves and two fish, and those who ate were five thousand men, besides women and children (Matt.14:17,21). The five husbands the woman had were symbolic of mankind's defilement (Jn.4:18). In the Sovereign Lord's comparison between the heaviness of Simeon the Pharisee's sin and the sinful weeping woman's sin, He said, *“There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?”* (Lk.7:41,42). In the Lord's discourse about talents and responsibilities, it was the one who had five talents who had taken the most and who had gained five more talents besides (Matt.25:16,20). In speaking

about understanding in the gift of tongues, Saint Paul the Apostle said, *“I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue”* (1Cor.14:18,19). In fighting Goliath, David in order to demonstrate the maximum that he could accomplish with his human ability, took in his shepherd’s bag *“five smooth stones”* (1Sam.17:40).

WISE AND FOOLISH

The wise souls are those whose behaviour is wise and who think about their future, like the unjust steward (Lk.16:8) whom the Lord commended for behaving wisely, and for thinking about his future. The wise virgins *“took oil in their vessels with their lamps”* (Matt.25:4), so they were prepared to meet the bridegroom with lighted lamps. They were prepared to meet the Lord at His Second Coming with enlightened souls according to His direction, *“Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately”* (Lk.12:35,36). As for the foolish virgins, they did not have this preparedness.

The word *foolish* does not signify illiterate or uncultured, but is oftentimes attributed to sinners or even atheists, as the Psalm says, *“The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’”* (Ps.14:1). A person may be an atheist philosopher yet foolish because he does not know God. Also, Job the Righteous said to his wife when she uttered words of blasphemy, *“You speak as one of the foolish women speak”* (Job2:10). Saint Paul the Apostle advised the people of Ephesus saying, *“See then that you*

walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise” (Eph.5:15), thus describing the one who does not walk circumspectly in his life as foolish. Solomon the Sage said, “The wise man’s eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness” (Ecc.2:14), and the Lord God said, “But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand” (Matt.7:26).

Therefore, the foolish virgins were foolish because they did not consider their eternal future. Indeed, the greatest foolishness is not to prepare for one’s eternal future.

Those ten virgins had aspects of similarities and aspects of differences. The aspects of similarity were that they all went out to meet the bridegroom, in the same way that the whole world awaits the Lord’s Second Coming; they all carried their lamps with them; and of all of them it was said that, *“But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept” (Matt.25:5).* What sleep may mean here is death. Due to the delay of the Lord’s Coming, many generations have died, both of the righteous and of the wicked, yet they shall all together rise in the General Resurrection, as it is written, *“for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (Matt.5:28,29).*

But when shall they rise? The parable says,

***“And at midnight a cry was heard:
Behold, the bridegroom is coming”***

Some think that the hour in which the Lord’s Second Coming will be is midnight! This is clearly wrong, because

midnight in the east of the world differs from midnight in the west. Midnight in the polar regions is different from the regions around the equator. Time differs from one region to another. But what is meant by midnight is the time during which people are asleep, that is, when they are not expecting this Coming!

Although the ten virgins had similarities from the outside, yet from within, there was a difference. The first difference was that some of them were wise whereas some of them were foolish. Due to their differences in wisdom and foolishness, *“Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps”* (Matt.25:3,4). This reveals a third difference between them which is that the wise thought of their future by preparing for it, whereas the foolish thought neither of their future nor of preparing for it.

The foolish virgins did not check their lamps before going to sleep to make sure there was enough oil in them, unlike the wise driver who in preparing for a car journey checks the car: Is there enough petrol in it? Is the engine charged? Are the brakes in working order? The wise virgins however, had circumspection, care and preparedness, and thought about what they would need to meet the bridegroom, whereas the foolish virgins thought only of the present and not about what might happen at midnight.

The Lord has given us this parable that we may prepare for the Lord's Coming and be wise, as did the five wise virgins and the unjust steward (Lk.16:8). We mentioned that the wise and foolish virgins were similar on the outside only, from the aspect that they were all virgins and waiting for the bridegroom. It was an outward similarity like the similarity between real and artificial

flowers. From the aspect of colour and appearance, the flowers are similar, but in essence, however, real flowers have life and fragrance, smoothness and suppleness, which artificial flowers do not have. Hence, we ought not to judge according to appearances.

The virgins' similarity was temporary; at the beginning only, not at the end. They were similar up to the arrival of the bridegroom and then their true states were revealed. Or we could say that the similarity between them was in this world only, yet not at the time of the Resurrection, in the same way that there appeared to be a similarity between the wheat and the tares, yet only up until the day of the harvest (Matt.13:40-42). Another point of contemplation is the term *virgins*.

VIRGINS

I think that this parable does not represent the whole of mankind in general, as much as it symbolises the types of ministers in the Church. We can perceive this from the meaning of the word *virgins*. A virgin is an unmarried woman who is not joined to a man but dedicated to God and His work. Saint Paul the Apostle explains this, saying, *"There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world- how she may please her husband"* (1Cor.7:34). Therefore, those virgins were among those who cared about the things of the Lord.

Unfortunately, even so there were foolish ones amongst them who lost their souls! Even though the foolish virgins had the outward appearance of piety, they

were believers, they carried lamps and were waiting for the bridegroom exactly the same as the five wise virgins, and said, “Lord, Lord”, meaning, they all had faith, nonetheless, their faith was theoretical or superficial. In comparison, the faith of the wise virgins was living and practical, fruitful and enlightened. What makes us incline to this interpretation is that in the same chapter or on the same occasion in which the Lord gave the parable of the virgins, He also mentioned the servants to whom He had given the talents to trade and profit in (Matt.25:14-30). And during that same week, He had delivered the parable of the wicked vinedressers, who *“when the chief priests and Pharisees heard His parables, they perceived that He was speaking of them”* (Matt.21:45).

THE OIL

The main difference between these two groups of virgins was keeping the oil to light their lamps. What is the oil and what does it symbolise? **Oil in the Holy Bible symbolises the work of the Holy Spirit.** The Lord commanded Moses to make a holy anointing oil from olive oil and quality spices, to be a holy anointing oil for the purpose of anointing, with which the tabernacle of meeting and all its altars and utensils were to be anointed, so that they would be most holy unto the Lord, and whatever touched them must be holy (Ex.30:23-29). The Lord commanded Moses to anoint Aaron and his sons with this holy anointing oil, to consecrate them that they might minister to Him as priests (Ex.30:30), their anointing becoming for them an everlasting priesthood (Ex.40:15).

So were these virgins lacking this holy anointing which consecrates them to the Lord’s service, and by

it their lamps would be lit? When Saul the king was anointed with this holy anointing oil, *“the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he prophesied among them”* (1Sam.10:9,10) and became the Lord’s anointed. When David as a young boy was anointed with this holy oil, the Spirit of the Lord came upon him *“from that day forward”* (1Sam.16:13). When Jacob the patriarch poured oil on the stone that he had put at his head, he consecrated that place as a house to the Lord and named it *Bethel* (Gen.28:18,19,22). **So then, did the foolish virgins’ lack of oil signify a lack of the work of the Spirit in them? And subsequently, the lack of Divine calling.**

Behold, the apostle says, *“How shall they preach unless they are sent?”* (Rom.10:15). Saint John the Apostle speaks to us about the importance of the anointing in the New Testament saying, *“But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things”; “But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true”* (1Jn.2:20,27).

Perhaps the oil of the virgins’ lamps remind us of the Oil of Myroon which sanctifies us, and by which we become temples of God and the Spirit of God dwells in us (1Cor.3:16)? By this Spirit we obtain enlightenment from the Lord as the apostle said, *“those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit”* (Heb.6:4).

Truly, the Holy Spirit is our light; for this reason, the Scripture warns us, saying, *“Do not quench the Spirit”* (1Thess.5:19). **Could this quenching have happened to the foolish virgins?** We commence our life with God by being born of water and the Spirit in baptism (Jn.3:5),

then we obtain the Holy Spirit and His indwelling in us through the holy anointing in the Sacrament of Chrismation (Myroon), a grace which the believer received by the laying on of the apostles' hands at the beginning of the Apostolic Era (Acts 8:17)(Acts 19:6).

Is merely obtaining the Holy Spirit sufficient? **For the Scripture says, “*be filled with the Spirit*” (Eph.5:18), and this is what the foolish virgins lacked. At the very least they did not stir up the Spirit in them**, which is what Paul the Apostle advised his disciple Timothy, saying, *“Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands”* (2Tim.1:6). It is not sufficient that there are vessels with our lamps, but we ought to fill them with oil, and to stir up the Spirit in us. But how?

By living by the Spirit, walking according to the Spirit (Rom.8:1), having fellowship with the Holy Spirit (2Cor.13:14) and gaining enlightenment from the Spirit. For the source of this enlightenment is the oil as was the lamp in the tabernacle of meeting in the Old Testament which was required to burn continually as the Lord commanded the people, *“that they bring you pure oil of pressed olives for the light, to cause the lamp to burn continually”* (Ex.27:20). Regarding preparing for His coming, the Lord commanded, saying, *“Let your waist be girded and your lamps burning; and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return”* (Lk.12:35-36).

How were lamps lit in the era before the advent of electricity? **They were lit by oil reaching a burning wick which would remain alight so long as there was oil reaching it. But if the oil finished, then the light would go out. This is identical to the situation of a**

person with the Holy Spirit. Likewise, candles that are made from oil remain lit so long as there is oil in them. This is just like a saint who shines by the Holy Spirit working in him, for the Holy Spirit is the source of light, symbolised by the wick of the lamp and the light of the candle. What is important is that a person preserves the source of the oil which lights his lamp, such that it does not go out.

OUR LAMPS ARE GOING OUT

The tragedy of the foolish virgins was their saying, “our lamps are going out” (Matt.25:8). This meant that they did not have the Spirit of God working in them. The Lord came at a time in which they had no communion with the Holy Spirit. That is why they had no permission to enter into the wedding feast; they did not possess the inner enlightenment which would qualify them for that.

What is astounding is that they asked the wise virgins to give them some of their oil! This was not possible. The oil represents the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. This is undoubtedly a personal, individual matter; it is not possible for someone to grant it to another, that is, it is not possible for someone to grant their individual state to someone else. A person cannot grant his relationship with God or his fellowship with the Holy Spirit to another person! The lamp of each person is enlightened by the oil inside him and not by someone else’s oil! A person’s righteousness is a personal matter, that cannot be lent to another, as it was said in the Book of Ezekiel, *“The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself”* (Ez.18:20).

David's righteousness was insufficient to rescue Absalom, so Absalom perished despite his being David's son! The goodness of our father Abraham was of no benefit to the rich man contemporary to poor Lazarus. That rich man sought a drop of water with which to wet his tongue from the torment of the flame yet found it neither from Lazarus nor from Abraham (Lk.16:24,26). The goodness of Elisha the Prophet did not benefit his disciple Gehazi when he took Elisha's staff to place it upon the Shunammite woman's dead son so he could rise, for the source of the blessing of Elisha's staff was Elisha himself and this blessing was not available in Gehazi's hands (2Kin.4:29-31).

The Holy Spirit indwelling in Elisha, could not be loaned to Gehazi.

The righteousness of our father Noah did not pass down to his grandson Canaan, but Canaan remained cursed for generation upon generation, even till the Sovereign Lord's meeting with the Canaanite woman (Gen.9:25);(Matt.5:22,26).

For this reason, the wise virgins were unable to give of their oil to the foolish virgins who had lamps but without oil.

Indeed, of what benefit is the lamp unless it has oil?

Of what benefit is it to a person if he has the name *Christian* but does not have faith in Christ! Of what benefit is the name to him? Or of what benefit is it to a person if he does have faith but the faith is nominal and theoretical, and he has no fellowship with the Holy Spirit and with the spiritual work? Of what benefit is it to a minister if he is full of action and movement, but without Spirit? It is as though he were a lamp without oil! Such was the state of the foolish virgins.

The lamp is the individual's personality, and the oil is the Holy Spirit working in him. As for the vessel in which the oil is stored, it is the heart and the mind and the will.

The wise virgins lived their whole lives storing up oil in their vessels. But while they slumbered and slept, their vessels remained filled with oil because they had prepared before the sleep of death. As for the foolish virgins their vessels had no oil in them, and unfortunately, they did not discover this except after the opportunity had passed. They had not examined their vessels carefully before they fell asleep, according to the Church's advice to us in the Compline and Midnight Prayers in which we say, ***Repent, therefore, O my soul, so long as you are dwelling upon the earth; for the dust in the grave offers no praise, in death there is no remembrance, and in Hades they offer no thanksgiving.***

Indeed, it is not possible to sell oil after death, and the only Seller of oil is God who would have shut the door and ended the time of selling.

The Church has taught you to be continually prepared and to remind yourself saying, *If this life were unending and this world everlasting then, O my soul, you would have a clear excuse. But if your bad deeds and lewd evils are exposed before the Just Judge, what answer will you then give when you are upon the bed of sins, lying and in disciplining your body, negligent?*

Yet in spite of this the foolish virgins did not heed the warnings and they did not go to buy oil and they remained thus until the time of Christ's Second Coming. The Bible

then says, ***“A cry was heard: Behold, the bridegroom is coming”*** (Matt.25:6). This cry is the sound of the angels declaring the Lord’s coming with trumpets, because the Scripture says, *“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God”* (1Thess.4:16); and *“in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised”* (1Cor.15:52). The Lord will come and those who are ready will go in with Him rejoicing and the door will be shut (Matt.25:10).

The first tragedy of the foolish virgins was their discovery that their lamps had no oil. As for their second tragedy, it was that the Lord’s door was shut without them.

THE DOOR WAS SHUT

The coming of the Lord shall be on a day when you are not looking for Him, and at an hour when you are not aware (Lk.12:46), *“at midnight”*, at a time of darkness, when you are asleep and unaware. You will hear a voice saying to all the virgins, *“Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet Him”*. Then all will go out but not all will go out with the same emotions. The ready hearts will meet Him with rejoicing, whereas the unprepared will begin *“to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’”* (Lk.23:30)(Rev.6:16), from the dread of the meeting. From then on there will be no more chances, and the door will be shut.

The door of repentance will be shut, and the door of hope will be shut, and all the opportunities for preparation will be shut.

There is no repentance after death, neither is oil sold at that time. The door of the Kingdom will be shut on those inside it; those inside will not be able to go out, and those on the outside will be able to enter in. And in like manner as it had previously been that God “*opens and no one shuts*”, now- after the Resurrection- it will be that God “*shuts and no one opens*” (Rev.3:7).

How regrettable are the lost chances, for the door had been open before death!

The door had been open before David who sinned and repented, and it had been open before Augustine and Moses the Black, before Saul the persecutor of the Church, and before Anianus the governor of Ansenia. They had all sinned and repented and entered through the open door, as did Pelagia and Mary of Egypt and many others who entered. However, after the door is shut, there will be no more chances to prepare nor for selling the oil!

So prepare from now, my brother, for the door is still open. Check your vessel every day and always be prepared. Behold, Saint Paul the Apostle says, “*Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves*” (2Cor.13:5). Do not be like the foolish virgins who in bewilderment and despair went to buy oil when the door was shut. They then started to knock on the door without hope. And so the Lord answered them saying, “*I do not know you*”.

I DO NOT KNOW YOU

This was the third and final and terrifying tragedy, that the Lord said to them, “*I do not know you*”; I do not know you as My own and from among My sheep. I do not know you as sons of the light and sons of the Kingdom! I do not know you, “*For whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven*” (Matt.10:33). I do not know those whose lamps are not lit. I do not know those who have no fellowship with the Holy Spirit. And thus, He said the same expression which He will say to those who will say to Him, “*Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?*” (Matt.7:21-23). To these He will answer, “*I never knew you*”.

“*I do not know you*” means that you are not worthy of My knowing you. It is a hard and dreadful expression and it is to such as these that the Holy Bible says, “*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*” (Heb.10:31). Of course, it is a fearful thing to those who are unprepared. Therefore, try to fill your vessel with oil from now, before the door is shut.