

# The Last Sunday of the Church Year

November 22, 2020

Matthew 25:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Soon, the year 2020 will come to its natural close. Will it end with a bang? Will the parties traditionally held on the festive night of New Year's Eve happen, even if small or socially distanced? Or will the world join together in one loud voice saying, *"I wish I never knew you"* to the year A.D. 2020? But, one will not forget the year, no matter how hard they wish or try. You will not forget the ups and downs of these days, weeks, and months any more than a disobedient child screaming in anger or a young person during a break-up with a boyfriend or girlfriend saying, *"I wish I never knew you."* These are some of the saddest and most hurtful words a person could utter. Words that wish history would be erased and the bonds of love severed forever.

While the end of the year won't happen for another month, we do come to the end of the Church Year today. The Gospel is one of those that leave us hanging on for an alternate ending, a last word from Jesus that inspires, that gives hope. But, the words that ring loudly in the final Gospel reading of the Church Year are these, *"Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you."* There's no wish involved in these words; it's a verdict, a proclamation to those who are unprepared for the coming judgment upon man.

The past three Sundays have been a continual warning for us to beware of "false christs" and "false prophets," how on the last day sheep and goats (believers and unbelievers) will be separated from one another. Today, we hear now how even some of those invited to the great wedding banquet will not be prepared, they will not have the oil needed to light the way and this great mystery of the end times leaves the heart in horror.

The horror is because some people that assemble within the Church will not enter paradise. The Ten Virgins in the parable represent the Church on earth. The virgins are separated between the wise and the unwise. From the beginning, there is no outward difference between the virgins; they all look the same, they all "appear" to be members of the one true Church. They have all fallen asleep the same. But five of them are wise, and five are foolish.

As the midnight cry goes out, the foolish are quickly revealed by their lack of preparation. The foolish have rested in the security of their own flesh and works. They

place their trust in their own wisdom and past piety to see them through the afflictions of this life. Night now comes, and where will they secure the oil needed to see them through to the Bridegroom's final arrival? It sounds terse and rough, but the wise virgins cannot share their oil with the foolish; it's not theirs to give.

The Proverb says, *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."* (Proverbs 1:7) To fear, love, and trust in God is to understand and believe that God is the giver of every good and needful thing not only for this life but for the life that is to come. The wise are unable to share their oil as it did not come from them. Instead, the oil of peace and forgiveness needed to enter the wedding hall comes from the Bridegroom Himself - Jesus Christ. The oil that sustains faith is given in Baptism, Confession, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper.

Hermann Sasse wrote, *"Is the foolishness of the virgins not also our foolishness? Have we not become tired and sleepy in the light of the Christian faith? Have we not let the lamps of hope, with which we would escort the coming of Christ, go out?"* We all confess with the Church in the creed, *"And He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead,"* but do we not grow weary and permit the flame of faith to grow dim at times? Do we not mechanically confess and gloss over the gravity of these words throughout the liturgy? To you, the cry comes out, awake! Prepare! The Bridegroom is near!

However, let's face it, as time goes on, it becomes easier to drift off to sleep. You are no different from the Lord's disciples. While Jesus went and prayed in Gethsemane before His death, He found them also asleep. Jesus said to Peter, *"What! Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."* (Matthew 26:40-41) The great battle between the spirit and the flesh continues to rage within you as well.

You see this today as the world continues to maneuver through the ups and downs of a virus. March was a long time ago, patience was extended among brothers and sisters in April, prayers were lifted for the hurting in May and June, the isolated in July, the lonely in August. But, now you grow restless. You have grown cold to today's needs, to the needs of neighbors, and even your fellow believers within the Church.

In these gray and latter days, it's easy to be unduly caught up in the whims and quarrels of the world. To see the next executive order or mandate during this time of waiting as one of the most significant days of tribulation the Church on earth has ever faced. But, the Church on earth has withstood tribulation, trial, and the fiery darts of the devil throughout time. But, never upon Her own works or doing, instead, always by the gracious hand of the Lord.

We are reminded by the parable of the Ten Virgins that we cannot believe for our neighbor, we cannot confess our neighbor's sins, or share the oil of faith needed for the final day. However, we are not free from concern and love for our neighbor, either. We must guard against seeing ourselves as merely autonomous beings wandering this world and Church in faith apart from one another. The Church has always been, as the Augsburg Confession rightly states, an *"assembly of believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity, and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel."* By this definition, the Church is the assembly of believers gathered and confessing with their lips, the shared faith that on the last day, *"[Jesus] will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead."*

The time of judgment and the time of the Bridegroom's return draws nearer with each passing day. We do not know the day or the hour. Yet, the words, "I never knew you" should frighten and arouse you to awake from slumber and confess your sins to God, confess your sins among one another, give forgiveness, receive forgiveness and the oil of faith that only God can provide to you. The words of St. Paul in our epistle remind us, *"For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep, we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing."* ( 1 Thessalonians 5:9-11) Encourage one another, build one another up, extend charity and understanding as you live in these last days. Because you are.

You may not want to remember the year 2020, but it is now part of the world's history. You may wish it away as much as you like, but you will never forget it. The Church does not observe the end of the Church Year like the world will observe the coming of 2021; instead, it solemnly prepares for the next year by doing what it does each and every Sunday. It confesses, it prays for one another, and it assembles to receive the Gospel promises, the Holy Sacraments. Through these means, you are united and bonded together as one in the love of Christ Jesus. So, awake dear sleepers, trust in the Son of God and await the time of His coming as an assembly of believers gathered together to receive the forgiveness of your sin and the oil of faith that will bring you joyfully to the day and time of the Bridegroom's return! +INJ+

*The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.  
Amen.*

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