

The month of November is that part of the season when we are coming to the close of the Church year. The last Sunday in November is Sunday before the start of Advent. And so we will begin again the cycle of celebrating the seasons of the Church year. We mark and celebrate the important names and dates and events in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ and of His Church. In the upcoming Advent, we recall that sense of expectancy, that longing for the birth of our Lord. We await the birth of Our Savior with great hope and expectation.

And we go on to celebrate the other events in the life of Jesus throughout the Church year. We read about His baptism by John in the Jordan River. We read about His miracles, how he healed and taught and prayed with His disciples and others. Most notably we celebrate His death and Resurrection at Easter. Each Sunday of the year we recall and celebrate what Easter means.

In Advent we anticipate the first coming of Christ. But there's no Church Feast day or season for the *second* coming of Christ, very likely because it hasn't happened yet. But a major, essential point in Christian theology and the teaching of the Church is that Jesus *will* come to the earth a second time. Ready or not, here He comes.

The Gospel reading for today conveys to us one of Jesus' more severe lessons. It is severe because it is another of those passages of Holy Scripture that puts to rest the idea of universalism, that is, the idea that everyone is going to heaven. *Not* everyone is going to heaven. Some will miss it. Some will not be ready to meet the Lord when He comes again. And the

consequences of that are the worst. All hope is lost for those who are unprepared to meet the Lord Jesus Christ when He comes to the earth for the second time.

Jesus' use of the imagery of a bridegroom and bridesmaids is very appropriate because elsewhere in the New Testament the relationship between Christ the Lord and His Church is likened to a marriage. The Church is referred to as the Bride of Christ. At the Second Coming, Jesus, like a bridegroom, comes to take His Bride, the Church. I had a professor in seminary who stressed this point. He said that Jesus isn't returning to the earth to collect individuals. He comes to take His Church. Those who hope to spend eternity with Him, and to enjoy the Wedding Banquet, had best be in the Church on the day of His coming.

One of the most chilling parts of this parable is when the bridegroom says to those foolish virgins who have been locked outside, "I do not know you." Those are among the very last words you would want to hear coming from the Lord Jesus Christ when you finally meet him face to face.

There are several points to this parable and one in particular to which we really need to pay very close attention. It is not merely that the foolish virgins missed the day, or that particular point in time when the bridegroom came for them. This isn't like missing a train or a bus. If you miss a train or a bus there's always a later one you can catch, or some other way of getting home. There is no other Lord and Savior coming to get us. There is only one Lord, Jesus Christ and He will come only a second time. There's no third time, no more after this next one.

But more importantly it's not just that they didn't happen to be there when he came for them, it's that they weren't prepared. Preparation for the coming of the bridegroom isn't something the virgins could just fall into on a moment's notice. Preparation for the coming of the bridegroom is something that takes a lifetime. You don't come to really know someone in a day or a month or even a year. You come to know someone truly by developing a relationship with that person over a long period of time, in some cases, even a lifetime. The wedding day is important, of course. But so is the *courtship*. Our position as Christians here and now in this world is the courtship part.

In His wisdom, the Good Lord has put incentives into the courtship period. Suppose we knew the exact time of His return. Suppose the New Testament said that on Saturday, June 25, 2033 at 9:00 in the morning, Jesus returns to the earth. What do you suppose people would do in the meantime? It's a safe bet that many people would live as if He were never coming, or as if He didn't exist. And then they would try to repent at 8:59 that Saturday morning in June of 2033.

I believe that there are such things as so-called "deathbed" conversions. As long as a man's heart is still beating and he has his wits about him, he can confess his sins to the Lord and be forgiven and spend eternity in Heaven. And that is a very good thing for such a man. But at the same time, I feel there is a tragic irony in such last moment conversions. It is true that such a person comes to know the salvation of Christ. But think of what it must be like to come to know how great the Lord is, and to know His love

and mercy right before you die, and all to the worse if you're at a ripe old age when it happens, and at the same time realize that you could have known it years and years before then. To come to know the Lord so late is to know how much you've missed all along. If that were you, what would you think at that point as you looked back on your life?

On the other hand, those who have known the Lord for most of their lives and have followed Him and obeyed Him and gotten to know Him and love Him more and more with each passing year haven't lost a thing. They have wisely prepared themselves to meet Him whenever He comes.

So how can we prepare ourselves to meet the Lord? His coming is a sure thing. Either we will die and go to meet Him face to face, or He will come again to the earth before we die. Either way, Christ the bridegroom is coming for His bride the Church. How can we be wise and be prepared for this inevitable meeting?

The first way is very simple. It comes from knowing who we are, and *whose* we are. The Nicene Creed is a good place to start. It never hurts to remind ourselves continually of the basic truths of the Christian faith, and so we do at Mass.

We are the people who have been created by God the Father almighty. As the creatures of God, we are subject to Him. We are His. We are the people of God. That's one way of describing who we are.

Secondly, Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son, came down from heaven the first time, for us and for our salvation. We are a people created by God the Father and redeemed by God the Son, who, will come again.

Thirdly, as believers in Jesus Christ, whose sins are forgiven and who are indwelt by the God the Holy Spirit, we are the Church, the Bride of Christ. Two of the things the Bride of Christ does are to expect the coming of the Bridegroom and prepare to meet Him accordingly.

The bridesmaids in the parable *went to meet the bridegroom*. Going to meet the bridegroom is the point of their existence. They've been preparing for this meeting for a long time. And so it is with the Church. There is no other end to which the Church is ordered, apart from being united with Christ her Lord. This is the place where all of history is leading us.

There was once a monk named Brother Lawrence who lived in France in the mid seventeenth century. His name is known to us in the 21st century because of some writings that exist about him and his way of life. All monks live under a rule. The Rule usually consists of strict practices of prayer, work and study to which the monk will devote himself entirely, forsaking all other things in life. Brother Lawrence had an extra rule for himself and this is what he is remembered for.

Brother Lawrence was a very humble man, a trait which suited him especially for life in a monastery. There are two things about Brother Lawrence that are notable. One I agree with very much and the other I do not. Brother Lawrence believed it was right for him to abandon literally everything and devote himself completely to God. He even felt that he should abandon the hope of heaven. He told himself that it didn't matter to him if went to heaven or hell, he was going to serve God with everything he had anyway. Now that part I disagree with because God has ordered His

Church toward heaven and being with God for eternity in heaven is God's will for all of His children.

The other thing that Brother Lawrence did, and with which I agree, is that his personal rule was what he called the practice of the presence of God. Brother Lawrence developed in himself the practice of living, thinking, feeling and doing everything he did, moment by moment, as if God Himself were right there with him at every moment. Brother Lawrence would speak to God at all times in his mind and in his heart. He would listen for God's voice, or look for God's hand in everything that was happening around him. Brother Lawrence lived as if he were in God's presence at all times.

It took him years to develop this rule. It didn't happen overnight. But if anything was ever good preparation for the day when we will meet the Lord Jesus Christ face to face, the practice of the presence of God is it.

The presence of God is where we as Christians, as the Church, the Bride of Christ are headed. There is no other destination. We would be wise to live toward that end and prepare ourselves for it. Today's the day to do that. Amen.