

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We approach again the end of the church year. Thus, Christian churches around the world — Lutheran, Catholic, and Protestant — are pondering the end times and the coming again of Christ in glory.

Of course, everybody wants to know: “When will it be?” Even the disciples wanted to know. They asked Jesus in the previous chapter: “*Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age*” (Matt. 24:3).

To be sure, Jesus told them of the signs: false Christs, war and rumors of wars, nation rising up against nation, famines and earthquakes, being hated for the sake of Christ, false prophets, lawlessness and lovelessness, and many more. And I know what you're saying — “why, that means we're living in the last days right now!” That's right, and so has said most generations since Christ's departure on the clouds.

That's as it should be; still, we can't know the exact day or the hour. Jesus said so in our Gospel: “*you know neither the day nor the hour.*” It seems rather definitive, even though you, like I, know that people have predicted it. But one thing we know ... they've always been wrong!

Of course, they have, as Jesus said earlier: “*But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only*” (Matt. 24:36). Again, “*you do not know on what day your Lord is coming*” (Matt. 24:42); again, “*the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect*” (Matt. 24:44); again, “*the master ...will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know*” (Matt. 24:50). Don't be duped by such charlatans. And don't kid yourselves; they're still around. Many of them are religious people, but not all are. “[Y]ou know neither the day nor the hour.”

So what's Jesus' point. The point is to watch. “*Watch, therefore,*” Jesus said at the end of our Gospel; and those are the kinds of exhortations that accompanies all of Jesus' declarations that we don't know when He'll return, that He will return unexpectedly. “*Therefore, stay awake ...,*” He said (Matt. 24:42); “*Therefore you also must be ready ...*” (Matt. 24:44). The outlook is not good for those who are not ready; they will be put out “*with the hypocrites.*” Luther calls such people false Christians with a fictitious faith, which is actually no faith at all. Jesus says, “*In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (Matt. 24:51).

Thus, Jesus proceeds to tell the parable of the ten virgins in our Gospel to illustrate what He had been teaching the disciples. It's well known, and we rejoice

that we got to sing today Philipp Nicolai's "king of chorales" that sets the parable before us in song.

Now this parable is different than many of Jesus' parables that speak of the reign of Christ in the here and now, effected by Jesus' presence among them. This one is set in the future — "*the kingdom of heaven will be like*" — and it anticipates the return of the King in glory.

The setting of a wedding is not unique. Jesus had earlier told a parable in which "*a king ... gave a wedding feast for his son*" (Matt. 22:1). And you might recall also how Jesus had earlier referred to Himself as the Bridegroom when His disciples came to Him concerned about the difference between John's disciples and them. Jesus told them, "*Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them*" (Matt. 9:14-15). Back there and here, Jesus is clearly the Bridegroom.

Interesting about this parable is the lack of a Bride for the Bridegroom. We're all familiar with the figure of Jesus as the Bridegroom and the Church as His Bride. Not in this parable. In this parable, the ten virgins represent the church. Ten virgins went with lamps in hand to meet the Bridegroom. Five were foolish; five were wise.

The foolish brought lamps; they were burning — at least for a time. Their foolishness was that they didn't bring extra oil in case the Bridegroom was delayed. The wise also had burning lamps. They, too, likely went out as they waited for the coming of the Bridegroom; but their wisdom was in bringing extra oil for their lamps.

The Bridegroom definitely was delayed, and that part of the parable is not hard for us to understand who have been waiting for His return for nigh two millennia now. We have confessed throughout our years that "He will come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead" (Nicene Creed), and we might be wondering "where is He?" "Look, Lord! Look at the world around us! Degradation ... debauchery ... despair ... death. It's time! You told us, '*Surely I am coming soon.*' We say, '*Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*'" (Rev. 22:20).

Nor is the virgins' drowsiness hard to understand, for our "*spirit ... is willing, but [our] flesh is weak*" (Matt. 26:41). Perfection is not in the cards for us. We grow weary ... become drowsy ... fall asleep. The ten virgins all fell asleep, but all ten were awakened by the call: "*Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!*" Or as we sang in the hymn: "The Bridegroom comes! Awake! Your lamps with gladness take! Alleluia!"

The maids all arose and trimmed their lamps — they fired the lamps back up that had gone out as they slept. No problem for the wise; they had more oil. Big problem for the foolish; they were out of oil, and their lamps went back out. They had to go in search of more, and when they returned, it was too late for these foolish, false believers. The door was shut. They weren't allowed in. They heard the terrible news: *"I do not know you."*

So, what is this oil? Dr. Jeff Gibbs of the St. Louis seminary is unwilling to say for sure. He says, "Exegetically, there is precious little with which to work." He does suggest this: *"the oil in the parable represents whatever it takes for you to be ready to honor the Bridegroom when he comes again in glory.* This means that, depending on a person's situation and spiritual need, the oil may stand now for this Christian truth, now for that important reality. Repentance is obviously needed if one is to be ready to welcome Christ Jesus when he returns, and so is true and humble faith. Perseverance and courage will be the needed gifts at times, and many will be the times when humility will keep [one] ever watching. Willingness to suffer for the name of Christ and to deny [oneself] (16:24) are key. Sorrowful awareness of the world's brokenness and a longing for God's name to be hallowed on the earth (6:9)—these, too, can be the oil, ever ready in our vessels" (Jeffrey Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 21:1–28:20*, 1323-4).

I'm not exactly sure why Dr. Gibbs is not willing, at least, to include at the head of his list the very things which the Holy Spirit uses to call us to faith and preserve us in it. I agree with commentator Lenski here who understands "the grace and the power of Christ in his Word as the oil" (R.C.H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, p. 964) — which would include the Sacraments, too. Which is why the wise could not share their oil. No one can hear the Gospel in your place; no one can be baptized in place of you, or repent or partake of the Sacrament. And it's why your parents, and your pastors, and your teachers, are ever urging you to church, and while there, dear high school friends, why they are urging you to put down your phones.

For what keeps us today from filling our flasks with this oil? There are so many things, but among them are those ubiquitous devices, always on, always illuminating our faces, always attracting our eyes and ears and hands.

The choir will remember that I preached a couple weeks ago at the high school, and as I called upon them to look to our God who is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble, I identified these devices and the social media apps on them as some of that trouble that they have. It was just at that time that forty-two Attorneys General had sued FaceBook and Instagram and other AGs sued Tik Tok for the harm they were causing our young people, especially to their mental health.

But these devices are also harmful to our spiritual health ... to our preparedness, for they distract us from the very thing we need to fill our flasks with this oil of God's grace. And I mean all of us. I mean me! We already know that they can distract us, leading to physical harm — like distracted driving, or as I experienced recently, walking in the Kroger parking lot with my face in my phone. HONK! A woman looked out the window: "Father, pay attention!" Yes, I was in my collar. I tried to wriggle out of it. "I was paying attention." She didn't buy it, and she was right. It's good she honked. But more significant than physical harm is the spiritual harm these things do — and other things, too — by distracting us from the one thing needful — God's word in ear and mouth. All of us!!

Dear friends in Christ, the cry has not gone out yet. The Bridegroom has not yet come. There is time; let's not waste it. God grant that we may listen for the call: "the Bridegroom comes! Awake!" And God grant that when it does come, we may follow after Him with lamps filled with oil and burning brightly, that we may sit with Him at His table forever at the eternal wedding feast. Until then, let us fill our flasks with oil at the foretaste here "*at your [altar], O LORD of hosts, [our] King and [our] God*" (Ps. 84:3).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.