

Krijtberg, 11 November 2023. 32nd Sunday through the year.
Wisdom 6:12-16, Matthew 25:1-13.

Peter van Dael SJ

THE PARABLE OF THE WISE AND FOOLISH GIRLS

The different parts of the parable

The wise and foolish virgins. Let me begin by explaining the different parts of the parable you have just heard. First, the title 'The wise and the foolish virgins'. Foolish and wise are Biblical terms. The first reading, from the book of Wisdom, is about wisdom. Wisdom in the Bible has to do with knowledge: practical knowledge and life experience. This wisdom ultimately has to do with God. So in Sirach we read: *The wellspring of wisdom is the word of God in the heights* (1:5). Wisdom in the Bible is further not only something of the head, but also of the hands. Wisdom as a mental attitude and acting according to that wisdom flow together. The opposite of the wise are the fools. They ignore God, and their actions are evil. Psalm 14 expresses this with the following words: *The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' Their deeds are loathsome and corrupt; not one does what is good* (v. 1, cf. Ps 53:2).

Ten. The parable speaks of five wise and five foolish virgins. Together ten. Ten indicates a certain fullness. There are ten plagues of Egypt and ten commandments. And ten is the minimum number to gather in the synagogue. Those ten virgins represent a whole group.

Lamp and oil. Lamp and oil each have their own meaning. In the 'meeting tent' - the portable sanctuary the Israelites carried with them on their journey through the desert - there were lamps burning on pure olive oil (Ex. 27:20-21). Later rabbis wondered what might have been meant by those lamps and that olive oil. The lamps would mean God, and oil the Jewish people. God, so to speak, could not manage alone. God - the lamp - needs his people - oil - to be a light to all nations.

The bridegroom. Then there is the bridegroom. In the Old Testament, the relationship between God and his people is sometimes compared to the relationship between a bridegroom and his bride, between the husband and his wife. The bridegroom then is image of God, and the bride is image of God's people. So there is a parallel between the pairs bridegroom-bride and lamp-oil. The bridegroom and the lamp mean God, the bride and the oil mean the people of God.

The parable in Jesus' mouth

Jesus wanted his parable to say that God is coming to his people and that his people can choose to enter God's kingdom, God's new world. The choice is free. You can say no: then you are among the foolish virgins. You can also say yes. In that case, you belong to the wise virgins.

You can compare the parable of the five wise and the five foolish virgins with the parable of the two houses (Mt 7:24-27), one of which was built on a rock and the other on sand. The man who had built his house on a rock was wise: image of the one who hears Jesus' words and acts accordingly. The man who had built his house on sand was foolish: image of the one who hears Jesus' words but does not act in accordance with Jesus' words.

Jesus placed his hearers before a decision: you have heard my words, now it is up to you whether or not to put these words into practice, whether or not to choose God's new world.

Jesus' parable retold by Matthew

The parable of the ten virgins was retold, two generations after Jesus' death, by Matthew. He changed the meaning of the story. In the parable as retold by Matthew, the bridegroom is not God, but Jesus who will come on the last day. So the ten virgins are no longer the audience of Jesus facing a choice, but the blessed and the condemned at the Last Judgement.

In the original parable as told by Jesus, his hearers were immediately faced with a choice: the kingdom of God becomes a

reality as soon as you choose it. With Matthew, the focus shifted to Christ's coming at the end of time. So there was a certain amount of time to pass, no one knew how much. In any case, vigilance was required to be ready for it when the time came.

What does the parable mean for us?

What does the parable mean for us? None of us knows how the earth will come to its end. That Jesus will return as a judge from the east on the last day is not a prognosis we can take literally. We can piece together the original parable of Jesus and the parable as retold by Matthew. The kingdom of God, God's new world, is where people choose it, immediately, here and now. Jesus fulfilled that new world in his life. When we listen to his words and act accordingly, we too make this new world a reality. God is present in this world as the lamp. He is present in the words of the Torah and in the words of Jesus. We are the oil that keeps the lamp burning.

I end with an image Jesus uses at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. He says to his audience: *You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it give light to all in the house. Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father* (Mt. 5:14-16).