

# **“Our Beloved Bridegroom”**

A Homily on Great Tuesday of Holy Week  
By St. John Chrysostom



You who were present yesterday remember my promise; which with the Lord's assistance is to be made good today, not to you only, but to the many others also who have come together. It is no easy question, who the ten virgins are, of whom five are wise, and five foolish. Nevertheless, according to the context of this passage which I have wished should be read again to you today, Beloved, I do not think, as far as the Lord vouchsafes to give me understanding, that this parable or similitude relates to those women only who by a peculiar and more excellent sanctity are called Virgins in the Church, whom by a more usual term we are wont also to call, "The Religious;" but if I mistake not this parable relates to the whole Church. But though we should understand it of those only who are called "the Religious," they are but ten? God forbid that so great a company of virgins should be reduced to so small a number! But perhaps one may say, "But what if though they be so many in outward profession, yet in truth they are so few, that scarce ten can be found!" It is not so. For if he had meant that the good virgins only should be understood by the ten, He would not have represented five foolish ones among them. For if this is the number of the virgins, which are called, why are the doors of the great house shut against five?

So then let us understand, dearly beloved, that this parable relates to us all, that is, to the whole Church together, not to the Clergy only of whom we spoke yesterday; nor to the laity only; but generally to all.

Why then are the Virgins five and five? These five and five virgins are all Christian souls together. But that I may tell you what by the Lord's inspiration I think, it is not souls of every sort, but such souls as have the Catholic (Universal) faith, and seem to have good works in the Church of God; and yet even of them, "five are wise, and five are foolish." First then let us see why they are called "five," and why "virgins," and then let us consider the rest. Every soul in the body is therefore denoted by the number five because it makes use of five senses. For there is nothing of which we have perception by the body, but by the five-folded gate, either by the sight, or the hearing, or the smelling, or the tasting, or the touching. Whoso then abstains from unlawful seeing, unlawful hearing, unlawful smelling, unlawful tasting, and unlawful touching, by reason of his incorruptness has gotten the name of virgin.

But if it be good to abstain from the unlawful excitements of the senses, and on that account every Christian soul has gotten the name of virgin; why are five admitted and five rejected? They are both virgins, and yet are rejected. It is not enough they are virgins; and that they have lamps. They are virgins, by reason of abstinence from unlawful indulgence of the senses; they have lamps, by reason of good works. Of which good works the Lord says, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." Again He says to His disciples, Let your loins be girded and your lamps burning." In the "girded loins" is virginity; in the "burning lamps" good works.

The title of virginity is not usually applied to married persons; yet even in them there is a virginity of faith, which produces wedded chastity. For that you may know, Holy Brethren, that every one, every soul, as touching the soul, and that incorruptness of faith by which abstinence from things unlawful is practiced, and by which good works are done, is not unsuitably "a virgin;" the whole Church which consists of virgins, and boys, and married men and married women, is by one name called a virgin. Whence prove we this? Hear the Apostle saying, not to the religious women only but to the whole

Church together; “I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” And because the devil, the corrupter of this virginity, is to be guarded against, after the Apostle had said, “I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2), he subjoined, “But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ” (2 Cor. 11:3). Few have virginity in the body; in the heart all ought to have it. If then abstinence from what is unlawful be good, whereby it has received the name of virginity, and good works are praiseworthy, which are signified by the lamps; why are five admitted and five rejected? If there be a virgin, and one who carries lamps, who yet is not admitted; where shall he see himself, who neither preserves a virginity from things unlawful, and who not wishing to have good works walks in darkness?

Of these then, my brethren, yea, of these let us the rather treat. He who will not see what is evil, he who will not hear what is evil, he that turns away his smell from the unlawful fumes, and his taste from the unlawful food of the sacrifices, he who refuses the embrace of another man’s wife, breaks his bread to the hungry, brings the stranger into his house, clothes the naked, reconciles the litigious, visits the sick, buries the dead, he surely is a virgin, surely he has lamps. What seek we more? Something yet I seek. What do you seek yet, one will say? Something yet I seek; the Holy Gospel has set me on the search. It has said that even of these, virgins, and carrying lamps, some are wise and some foolish. By what do we see this? By what make the distinction? By the oil; some great, some exceedingly great thing does the oil signify. Do you think that is not love? This we say as searching out what it is; we hazard no precipitate judgment. I will tell you why love seems to be signified by the oil. The Apostle says, “Show I unto you a more excellent way. Though I speak with tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal” (1 Cor. 12-31-13:1). This, that is “love,” is “that more excellent way,” which is with good reason signified by the oil. For oil swims above all liquids. Pour in water, and pour in oil upon it, the oil will swim above. Pour in oil; pour in water upon it, the oil will swim above. If you keep the usual order, it will be uppermost; if you change the order, it will be uppermost. “Love never fails.”

What is it then, brethren? Let us treat now of the five wise and the five foolish virgins. They wished to go to meet the Bridegroom. What is the meaning “to go and meet the Bridegroom”? To go with the heart, to be waiting for his coming; but he tarried. “While he tarried, they all slept.” Who is “all”? Both the foolish and the wise, “all slumbered and slept.” Think we is this sleep good? What is this sleep? Is it that the tarrying of the Bridegroom, “because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold”? Are we to understand this sleep so? I like it not. I will tell you why. Because among them are the wise virgins; and certainly when the Lord said, “Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold” (Matt. 24:12-13). He went on to say, “But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.” Where would you have those wise virgins be? Are they not among those that “shall endure unto the end”? They would not be admitted within at all, brethren, for any other reason, than because they have “endured unto the end.” No coldness of love then crept over them, in them love did not wax cold; but preserves its glow even unto the end. And because it glows even unto the end, therefore are they told to enter in, as the excellent servant, “Enter into the joy of your Lord.” What then is the meaning of they “all slept”? There is another sleep which no one escapes. Remember you not the Apostle saying, “But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep” (1 Thess. 4:13), that is, concerning them which are dead? For why are they called “they which are asleep,” but because they are in their own day? Therefore, “they all slept.” Do you think that because

one is wise, he has not therefore to die? Be the virgin foolish, or be she wise, all suffer equally the sleep of death.

But then continually say to themselves, “Lo, the day of judgment is coming now, so many evils are happening, so many tribulations thicken; behold all things which the Prophets have spoken, are nearly fulfilled; the day of judgment is already at hand.” They who speak thus, and speak in faith, go out as it were with such thoughts to “meet the Bridegroom.” But, lo! War upon war, tribulation upon tribulation, earthquake upon earthquake, famine upon famine, nation against nation, and still the Bridegroom comes not yet. Whilst then He is expected to come, all they who are saying, “Lo, He is coming, and the Day of Judgment will find us here,” fall asleep. Whilst they are saying this, they fall asleep. Let each one then have an eye to this his sleep, and persevere even unto his sleep in love; let sleep find him so waiting. For suppose that he has fallen asleep, “Will not He who falls asleep afterwards rise again?” Therefore “they all slept;” both of the wise and the foolish virgins in the parable, it is said, “they all slept.”

“Lo, at midnight there was a cry made.” What is, “at midnight”? When there is no expectation, no belief at all of it. Night is put for ignorance. A man makes as it were a calculation with himself: “Lo, so many years have passed since Adam, and the six thousand years are being completed, and then immediately according to the computation of certain expositors, the Day of Judgment will come;” yet these calculations come and pass away, and still the coming of the Bridegroom is delayed, and the virgins who had gone to meet him sleep. And, lo, when He is not looked for, when men are saying, “The six thousand years were waited for, and, lo, they are gone by, how then shall we know He will come? He will come at midnight. What is “will come at midnight”? Will come when you are not aware. Why will He come when you are not aware of it? Hear the Lord Himself, “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Lord has put in His own power.” “The day of the Lord,” says the Apostle, “will come as a thief in the night.” Therefore, watch by night that you be not surprised by the thief. For the sleep of death whether you are willing or not will come.

“But when that cry was made at midnight.” What cry was this, but that of which the Apostle says, “In the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet”? “For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed”? And so when the cry was made at midnight, “Behold, the Bridegroom comes;” what follows? “Then all those virgins arose.” What is, “they all arose”? “The hour will come,” said the Lord Himself, when “all that are in the graves shall hear His voice, and shall come forth” (Jn. 5:28,29) therefore at the last trumpet they all arose. “They that 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). What is the meaning of “took no oil with them in their vessels”? What is “in their vessels”? In their hearts; whence the Apostle says, “For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience” (2 Cor. 1:12). There is the oil, the precious oil; this oil is of the gift of God. Men can put oil into their vessels, but they cannot create the oil. See, I have oil; but did you create the oil? It is of the gift of God. You have oil. Carry it with you. What is “carry it with you”? Have it within, there pleases God.

For, lo, those foolish virgins, “took no oil with them,” wish to please men by that abstinence of theirs whereby they are called virgins, and by their good works, when they seem to carry lamps. And if they wish to please men, and on that account do all these praiseworthy works, they do not carry oil with

them. Do you then carry it with you, carry it within where God sees; there carry the testimony of your conscience. For he who walks to gain the testimony of another, does not carry oil with him. If you abstain from things unlawful, and do good works to be praised of men; there is no oil within. And so when men begin to leave off their praises, the lamps fail. Observe then, beloved, before those virgins slept, it is not said that their lamps were extinguished. The lamps of the wise virgins burned with an inward oil, with the assurance of a good conscience, with an inner glory, with an inmost charity. Yet the lamps of the foolish virgins burned also. Why burnt they then? Because there was yet no want of the praises of men. But after that they arose, that is in the resurrection from the dead, they began to trim their lamps, that is, began to prepare to render unto God an account of their works. And because there is then no one to praise, every man is wholly employed in his own cause, there is no one then who is not thinking of himself, therefore were there none to sell them oil; so their lamps began to fail, and the foolish betook themselves to the five wise, "give us of your oil, for our lamps are gone out" (Matt. 25:8). They sought for what they had been wont to seek for, to shine that is with others' oil, to walk after others' praises. "Give us of your oil, for our lamps are gone out."

But they say, "Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves" (Matt. 25:9). This was not the answer of those who give advice, but of those who mock; and why mock they? Because they were wise, because wisdom was in them; for they were not wise by ought of their own; but that wisdom was in them, of which it is written in a certain book, she shall say to those that despised her, when they have fallen upon the evils which she threatened them; "I will laugh over your destruction." What wonder then is it, that the wise mock the foolish virgins? And what is this mocking?

"Go to them that sell, and buy for yourselves:" you who never were wont to live well, but because men praised you, who sold you oil. What means this, "sold you oil"? "Sold praises." Who sells praises, but flatterers? How much better had it been for you not to have acquiesced in flatterers, and to have carried oil within, and for a good conscience sake to have done all good works; then you might say, The righteous shall correct me in mercy, and reprove me, but the oil of the sinner shall not fatten my head." Rather, he says, let the righteous correct me, let the righteous reprove me, let the righteous buffet me, let the righteous correct me, than the "oil of the sinner fatten mine head." What is the oil of the sinner, but the blandishments of the flatterer?

"Go" then "to them that sell," this have you been accustomed to do. But we will not give to you. Why? Lest there be not enough for us and you.' What is, lest there be not enough"? This was not spoken in any lack of hope, but in a sober and godly humility. For though the good man have a good conscience; how knows he, how He may judge who is deceived by no one? He has a good conscience, no sins conceived in the heart solicit him, yet, though his conscience be good, because of the daily sins of human life, he says to God, "forgive us our debts;" seeing he has done what comes next, "as we also forgive our debtors." He has broken his bread to the hungry' from the heart, from the heart has clothed the naked; out of that inward oil he has done good works, and yet in that judgment even his good conscience trembles.

See then what this, "Give us oil," is. They were told "Go rather to them that sell." In that you have been used to live upon the praises of men, you do not carry oil with you; but we can give you none; "lest there be not enough for us and you." For scarcely do we judge of ourselves, how much less can we

judge of you? What is “scarcely do we judge of ourselves”? Because, “When the righteous King sits on the throne, who will glory that his heart is pure?” It may be you do not discover anything in your own conscience; but He who sees better, whose Divine glance penetrates into deeper things, discovers it may be something, He sees it may be something, He discovers something. How much better may you say to Him, “Enter not into judgment with Your servant”? Yea, how much better, “Forgive us our debts”? Because it shall be also said to you because of those torches, because of those lamps; “I was hungry, and you gave Me meat.” What then? Did not the foolish virgins do so too? Yea, but they did it not before Him. How then did they do it? As the Lord forbids, who said, “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven... And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward” (Matt. 6:1, 5). They have bought oil, they have given the price; they have bought it, they have not been defrauded of men’s praises, they have sought men’s praises, and have had them. These praises of men aid them not in the judgment day; but the other virgins, how have they done? “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” He did not say, “may glorify you,” for you have no oil of your own self. Boast yourself and say, “I have it; but from Him,” for what have you that you have not received? So then in this way acted the one, and in that the other.

Now it is no wonder, that “while they went to buy,” while they are seeking for persons by whom to be praised, and find none; while they are seeking for persons by whom to be comforted, and find none; that the door is opened, that “the Bridegroom came,” and the Bride, the Church, glorified then with Christ, that the several members may be gathered together into their whole. “And they that were ready went in with Him to the marriage: and the door was shut.” Then the foolish virgins came afterwards; but had they bought any oil, or found any from whom they might buy it? Therefore they found the doors shut; they began to knock, but too late.

It is said, and it is true, and no deceiving saying, “Knock, and it shall be opened unto you;” but now when it is the time of mercy, not when it is the time of judgment. For these times cannot be confounded, since the Church sings to her Lord of “mercy and judgment.” It is the time of mercy; repent. Can you repent in the time of judgment? You will be then as those virgins, against whom the door was shut. “Lord, Lord, open to us.” What! Did they not repent, that they had brought no oil with them? Yes, but what profits them their late repentance, when the true wisdom mocked them? Therefore “the door was shut.” And what was said to them? “I know you not.” Did not He know them, who knows all things?

What then is, “I know you not?” I refuse, I reject you. In my are I do not acknowledge you, my are knows not vice; now this is a marvelous thing, it does not know vice, and it judges vice. It does not know it in the practice of it; it judges by reproving it. Thus then, “I know you not.”

The five wise virgins came, and “went in.” How many are you, my brethren, in the profession of Christ’s Name? Let there be among you the five wise, but be not five such persons only. Let there be among you the five wise, belonging to this wisdom of the number five. For the hour will come, and come when, we know not. It will come at midnight, watch. Thus did the Gospel close; “Watch, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” But if we are all to sleep, how shall we watch? Watch with the

heart, watch with faith, watch with hope, watch with charity, watch with good works; and then, when you shall sleep in your body, the time will come that you shall rise. And when you shall have risen, make ready the lamps. Then shall they go out no more, then shall they be renewed with the inner oil of conscience; then shall that Bridegroom fold you in His spiritual embrace, then shall He bring you into His House where you shall never sleep, where your lamp can never be extinguished. But at present we are in labor, and our lamps flicker amid the winds and temptations of this life; but only let our flame burn strongly, that the wind of temptation may increase the fire, rather than put it out.