

17. September 2024

The Wise Virgins

Mt 25:1-13

A reading for the memorial of St. Hildegard of Bingen

Then the kingdom of Heaven will be like this: Ten wedding attendants took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were sensible: the foolish ones, though they took their lamps, took no oil with them, whereas the sensible ones took flasks of oil as well as their lamps. The bridegroom was late, and they all grew drowsy and fell asleep. But at midnight there was a cry, "Look! The bridegroom! Go out and meet him." Then all those wedding attendants woke up and trimmed their lamps, and the foolish ones said to the sensible ones, "Give us some of your oil: our lamps are going out." But they replied, "There may not be enough for us and for you; you had better go to those who sell it and buy some for yourselves." They had gone off to buy it when the bridegroom arrived. Those who were ready went in with him to the wedding hall and the door was closed. The other attendants arrived later. "Lord, Lord," they said, "open the door for us." But he replied, "In truth I tell you, I do not know you." So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour.

There is no doubt that St. Hildegard of Bingen, whose memorial we celebrate today, was one of these prudent virgins, who kept her lamp lit and was ready at the precise moment of the Bridegroom's arrival. As a Benedictine nun and a woman graced with many gifts from God, Hildegard cultivated that vigilance that we all need to have, whatever our state in life. Women like her remind us and show us how a life grounded in God can bear abundant fruit.

Vigilance is a constant requirement in Sacred Scripture. Again and again, with new examples, the Lord exhorts us to be vigilant.

Indeed, vigilance is necessary because we are surrounded by enemies who want to harm us.

Vigilance is different from fear and distrust. When we are afraid, we allow ourselves to be paralyzed by dangers. Distrust, on the other hand, counts firmly on evil everywhere,

so that it is absorbed by it. Vigilance, on the other hand, despite being aware of the existence of evil, does not focus its attention on it, but on God. This is the decisive difference!

Today's Gospel gives us a very illustrative example. The ten virgins are waiting together for the bridegroom. They all seem to be ready to go out to meet him. But it turns out that the bridegroom arrives at a different time than expected. When he finally arrives, five of the virgins are left behind, because they have no oil left to light their lamps, and they have no reserve. The other five, on the other hand, who were wise virgins and had enough oil with them, are allowed to enter the wedding feast with the bridegroom. The Lord concludes this parable with the exhortation: *"So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour."*

If we relate this parable to the spiritual life, we can assume that the lives of the wise virgins must have been authentic. Their faith was deep enough to endure the long time of waiting. So it is in the spiritual life when our following of Christ is well grounded, when it is persevering, when we cling to Him even on the days when everything is difficult and Jesus seems absent. The oil that the wise virgins carry with them brings to mind this word of the Lord: *"Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another"* (Mk 9:50).

When we perform good works in order that God may be glorified through them, then we are storing up reserve oil. Jesus said on another occasion, *"your light must shine in people's sight, so that, seeing your good works, they may give praise to your Father in heaven"* (Mt 5:16).

The wise virgins teach us to be provident. By this term we are not referring to an attitude of worry and anxiety, but to prudence. This virtue - Christian prudence - considers each situation under the criterion of whether what I am doing is profitable for the Kingdom of God or not. Moved by the virtue of prudence, we can leave behind things that are simply licit, always putting before us that which is even better. St. Paul says in this regard: *"Everything is permissible; maybe so, but not everything does good"* (1 Cor 10:23).

By living according to this prudence, our soul will be more and more inclined to opt for what is best, without falling into scruples or inner tension. The more the soul is trained in this prudent way of living, the more it will stabilize itself and learn to

recognize in every situation the Will of God and His permissions, and thus make the right response. Moreover, the soul will become capable of resisting long periods of dryness, just as the wise virgins were able to await the coming of the bridegroom, even though it took longer than expected, because they had enough oil in their reserve.

Vigilance, then, means being and remaining focused on what is essential; we cannot let ourselves be carried away by the superficial! Our hearts must be focused on Christ and remain in Him!

A good way to acquire this attitude is to intensify our prayer life more and more, so that our hearts, having trained very well in it, can easily rise to God and remain with Him.

The Holy Spirit, who prays in us (cf. Rom 8:26), is the oil that makes the lamps burn, as symbolized in this parable; and this oil is at our disposal even as the night grows longer and longer in expectation of the Bridegroom, whether His coming refers to the end of our personal life or to the End of Time, when the Lord will return in His glory.