

Sunday, March 1, 2026 Second Sunday in Great Lent Worship Sermon

“The Parable of the Ten Virgins” Pastor Takaaki Inoue

1 Thessalonians 5:1-8, Matthew 25:1-18

① **【A faithless, crooked age where everyone falls asleep】**

Weddings in the Middle East are still held at night. The groom first goes with his friends to the bride's house to fetch her. The bride waits for the groom with her friends. When the groom arrives, his friends greet him with torches, and together with the bride, they form a procession to enter the groom's house. There, they hold a seven-day wedding feast with singing, dancing, and feasting. Jesus' parable today was told against the backdrop of this Jewish wedding custom.

In this parable, the bridegroom represents Christ, the bride represents the Church, and the ten virgins, the bride's friends, represent Christian believers. Five of them were wise and prepared lamps along with oil, but five were foolish; they had lamps but no oil.

“The bridegroom was delayed” (verse 5) refers to the delay of Christ's return. Paul states, “For we do not belong to the night or to darkness” (1 Thessalonians 5:4), declaring this world to be “night.” It is as if this world were a realm without “God who is light,” where the future is unseen. And because it is night, everyone grows drowsy. In the Bible, “sleep” signifies the loss of faith. Here too, it says, “They all began to fall asleep from exhaustion” (verse 5). Jesus said, “What a faithless and perverse generation this is! ” (Matthew 17:17). Continuing to believe in this world is that difficult. The devil makes God's word seem like mere fantasy, making the wisdom of this world appear more appealing and genuine than God's word. Perhaps the world's information makes up 90%, while the kingdom of God's information is only about 10%. That's how people gradually sink deeper into darkness, until they can see nothing. There is simply too little information about the kingdom of God. How foolish.

② **【The Foolish Virgins and the Wise Virgins】**

At midnight, a cry rang out: “Here comes the bridegroom! Go out to meet him!” All the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. But the lamps of the five foolish virgins were going out. So they asked the five wise virgins, “Give us some of your oil. Our lamps are going out.” (verse 8) But the wise replied, “No, there isn't enough for us and you. Go instead to the shop and buy some for yourselves.” (verse 9) While the foolish went to buy oil, the bridegroom arrived. He entered the bridegroom's house with the five wise who were ready, and the door was shut. When the foolish virgins returned later with their oil and cried, “Master, master! Open to us!” (verse 11), the master replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” (verse 12), and they

were not allowed to enter the house (the kingdom of God). Reading this parable, I find it utterly perplexing. Without oil, the lamp goes out. Why did these foolish virgins not prepare oil?

● This church has many lamps, so I always peek into the glass cups to check the candle wax levels. If I think there isn't enough, I immediately go to the Buddhist altar shop to buy more candles. Otherwise, the flames would go out during worship and be useless. Also, since we have Holy Communion every week, I always keep the wine and grape juice replenished. Otherwise, if there wasn't enough during worship, we couldn't administer Communion. My mind is always filled with preparations for worship. Similarly, if she knew the bridegroom was likely to be late, why didn't she look inside her own lamp? If she had looked, she would have noticed there was only a little oil left. Then she would have realized it was far from enough, and it would have been natural to make preparations.

In other words, the foolish virgins failed to examine their lamps. Since all ten virgins carried lamps, this symbolizes faith. We must examine that faith against the words of Scripture. When we stand before Christ, we must consider whether our faith will stand up to scrutiny. "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. " (2 Corinthians 13:5) It feels as though these foolish virgins were not living with Christ before their eyes. They could be described as believers who place their faith in people rather than in God. Faith is something we practice always keeping God before us. The Psalms say, "They do not set God before them." (Psalm 54:5, 86:14) The question is asked: Did you seek God? Are you truly living with God before you?

③ **【Preparing Oil in This World】**

So what does it mean to prepare oil? If the lamp represents "faith," then the oil signifies the "Holy Spirit." Just as a fire goes out without oil, without the Holy Spirit, we cannot confess our faith. Merely having faith is not enough. We must make it certain. Even if we go to heaven, without the oil of the Holy Spirit, the lamp of faith will go out. This is true both on earth and in heaven. Faith did not originate from within us; it was given by God. If faith is a talent, we must increase it. If buried in the ground, it will be lost. It will be taken away. The Holy Spirit enters a person at baptism, but it does not remain full forever. Unless one seeks God, it gradually diminishes. Whether the Holy Spirit is full within a person can be discerned by the words that come from their mouth. If words of anger or condemnation come forth, the Holy Spirit does not dwell there. If words of joy, gratitude, and praise come forth, the Holy Spirit dwells within. For what is within a person comes out through their mouth. And I cannot distribute that Holy Spirit. It is something each individual must seek for themselves. Saint Seraphim of Sarov

wrote in the 18th century:

●The true goal of a Christian's life lies in obtaining the Holy Spirit. ... God, the Word, our Lord, the God-man Jesus Christ, likens our entire life to a marketplace. He calls our earthly existence a business. He tells all people, "Do business until I come to save the age, for the days are evil." In other words, use your time to obtain heavenly goods, employing earthly things as means. ...Trade with Him who will give you the best in return for Christ. Gather the capital of God's grace and deposit it in God's eternal bank.

It is too late to go buy the oil called the Holy Spirit after the bridegroom arrives. In other words, we must prepare the Holy Spirit while we are still living in this world.

The church lifts our eyes from earth to heaven, from the words of this world to the words of God, from the transitory to what endures forever. When we come to church, we must know the "news from the Kingdom of Heaven" and smell the "fragrance of heaven." The church is filled with icons (holy images). Icons are called "windows to heaven." All the people depicted here are those who still live in heaven today. Therefore, when we come to church, we see heaven—the world beyond. We worship together with them. Their world is our true homeland. At the front, the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—sits enthroned. Though we are on earth, we pray, hope, and live as if standing in heaven. Now, during Great Lent, the icon of Christ our King, crowned with thorns and crucified, stands at the front. Each time I see this, I must remember: my King ascended the cross bearing my sins.

During Great Lent, we pray the prayers of Saint Ephrem the Syrian from the 4th century. Ordinary people ask a king for earthly rewards. But Ephrem prays, "O Lord, King, show me my sins and grant me a heart that does not judge my brother." This is no ordinary prayer. He is asking for the heart necessary to live in the Kingdom of Heaven. As we read the Psalms, we encounter many prayers that make us think, "This must be about Jesus." We praise Jesus and extol Him. The Psalms are like love letters to Jesus. Our love for this One grows ever stronger.

Alexander Schmemmann said, "Today's Christians live as if Christ's return were impossible. That is the greatest sin." Let us always keep Christ before us in our faith. Let us check our faith against Christ's words and deeds. Let us be filled with the oil of the Holy Spirit, praise Christ, see His kingdom, and serve Christ, our loving King.