

SAINTS TRIUMPHANT

MATTHEW 25:1-13

Don't be late.

The worst part about being late is always the knowledge that things could have turned out better if there had only been a little more time, and the five foolish virgins were late. The doors were shut. They were invited guests. They had put a lot of work helping the bride get ready for this big day. Their seats were no doubt sitting empty as a testament to their tardiness. But in the end none of it mattered. They were too late. They had missed their chance. And why? Simply because they had not been prepared.

No one can claim they haven't been invited. No one claim that they haven't been offered a seat. No one can claim that salvation wasn't right on the other side of the door. Yet many will not be ready, many will be too late, many will find the doors to heaven shut to them.

My first car was a 1977 Mercury Cougar, a hootie if there ever were one. It had a tendency to cut a hard turn if you had a girl with you on its shimmering vinyl bench seats, not that I ever took advantage of that, since I hadn't met my beloved yet. The thing could sail, and I don't mean it could drive quickly, no, I literally mean that if I drove it into the water it probably would have sailed. It was a boat of a car. If I was careful, I could get about nine miles to the gallon in it. I hated filling up the tank, and that was when gas was 87 cents per gallon. I can't even imagine what I'd be muttering under my breath at the gas station now.

One of the nicest features on the 1977 model of the Cougar was that by 1993 most of the gauges didn't work. The speedometer worked on feast days, the odometer logged every third mile, and the gas gauge was about as reliable as opening the cap and sniffing the fumes. Needless to say, driving was gambling. I never knew how many miles I had left or when I would run out of fuel. At first, I'd try to get every last drop out of each tank, but I eventually learned it was best to keep the tank full, that is, unless I wanted to walk to the station with a jug in my hand for all my friends to see as they drove home from school.

The five foolish virgins were gambling. They assumed there was plenty of gas in the tank. But the bridegroom was late according to their calculations and they ran out of oil for their torches, and, as they went to buy more, they missed out on the party. Are you gambling? Christ is never late. He will come at exactly the right time. Has the fact that He has not come yet lulled you into thinking He won't come anytime soon? Will there be gas in your tank or oil in your torches, or will you be shut out? Salvation is nothing to bet on.

The torches of ancient times guzzled oil like my Cougar sucked gas. They had to be refilled with oil every fifteen minutes or so, which meant that one needed to have a good supply on hand if they wanted to have light through the night.

The torches essentially burned a rag. From time to time, the rag would become too charred and would have to be trimmed. It would in essence burn out. So, almost as often as they changed the oil, they would trim the rag, casting off the old and pulling out the new. It was a repetitive but essential process.

How much oil do you have in your tank? How charred is your wick? All of us face the danger of running on empty. All of us face the danger of burning out, especially when we are run ragged through the week in a world full of demands, responsibilities, temptations, and empty promises. How often are we like a dog chasing our tail, spinning and spinning but getting nowhere, exhausted from the task with little to show for it. We need to stop and refuel. We need to cast off the old and pull out the new. We need to be reenergized.

I don't remember who it was, but a member once sent me the story of a debate that raged in an editorial column of a newspaper. Someone had written in one week saying that he stopped going to church because he could remember few if any of the lessons and sermons he heard there and for that reason didn't think they had done him any good, that he had gotten anything out of them, or something along those lines. In the following weeks, letters came in on both sides of the issue. The final letter that ended the debate came from a man who said that his wife had made him countless meals throughout his life. He admitted he couldn't remember most of them. He said that on the surface he might even assume he hadn't gotten much out of them. But then he went on to ask what would have happened to him if he hadn't had any of those meals. Obviously, he would have starved. Each meal had been important. Each meal had contributed something, whether or not he knew it at the time or clearly remembered it later. We have to eat if we want to survive, and even the least memorable meal, so long as it includes healthy ingredients, feeds us and contributes to our survival.

So also, every service in God's house, every sermon, even the least memorable, so long as it does not include the poison of false doctrine and includes the kernel of God's Word, feeds us and contributes to our survival. Will you remember it all? I hope so, but most likely not, but to go unfed is to slowly starve.

The oil in our parable is the gospel. The lamps are faith. Faith runs on the good news of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Faith is fueled by Word and Sacrament. Will faith die if it misses a meal? No, it may not, but is it better off for missing a meal? No, it is not. And will faith run empty if it is not replenished regularly and with care? Yes, it most certainly will. And what will happen to those whose tanks are empty at Jesus' return, those who are not ready when called through death or gathered on the Last Day? We learned the answer to that last week, from this same chapter of Scripture, and Jesus reiterates it today: *"Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."* And similarly, *"Truly, I say to you, I do not know you."* *"Watch therefore,"* Jesus warns, *"for you know neither the day nor the hour."*

No offense, but you're the '77 Cougar. You guzzle gas. You easily run empty. And, like the rag in the torch, you burn out quickly if you're not careful. You're the '77 Cougar, and so am I. So will you be ready when Christ calls, when the heavenly Bridegroom arrives? There's no reason you shouldn't be, because Christ by His death has opened the door to heaven, and the oil of the gospel, the oil of gladness, is free and overflowing, and Jesus light shines brightly in those who bask in the mercy of God's Son. There is no reason for you to be late. There is no reason for you to starve, to run empty, to burn out. Jesus' grace can fill your tank

and the tanks of all the world, and the price never goes up. It's always the same. It's always free.

Most, if not all of you, have heard it before: "You're too late." Don't hear it on the Last Day. No, burn the midnight oil of the gospel, make your wick brand new again and again through confession and absolution. Be ready for the Bridegroom's coming, because that is what He wants you to be, for you've been invited, and your place has been set at the feast. *"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."* And now get ready to come up and receive the oil of grace, because with that oil you are ready, no matter what the day or hour may be. Amen.