REFLECTION · A LAYMAN'S READING

I Know You Not

The ten virgins, for the thirty-second Sunday of the year. Who the bridegroom speaks to, what oil is, two kinds of wisdom, and an ending the parable withholds. Food for thought, not teaching; the liberties are marked where they are taken.

Richard Verver · November 2026

The parable of the ten virgins was read at Mass this morning, and the deacon preached it the way it is always preached: be ready, keep oil in your lamp, the hour is coming when it will be too late. He is not wrong. That is the moral Matthew himself hangs on it, *Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour*, and a preacher who gives the evangelist's own moral has done his duty by the text. But the deacon added a line the text does not have, and it has followed me around all day like a dog. He said: they sought, and did not find; they knocked, and it was not opened unto them. I want to look at what the parable says, what it is careful not to say, and what, if the silence must be filled, the rest of the Gospel would fill it with.

Who is spoken to

Read it again, and this time listen for nothing but the bridegroom's voice. Ten virgins go out to meet him with lamps. Five are prudent and carry oil in flasks besides; five are foolish and carry none. He tarries; all ten nod, and sleep. At midnight the cry goes up, and all ten rise and trim their lamps. The foolish ask for oil and are refused; they go to buy; while they are gone he comes, and *they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut*. The others come back and call through the door, *Lord, Lord, open to us*. And he answers, *Verily I say unto you, I know you not*.

That is the only thing he says in the whole parable. He never speaks to the wise. They are not greeted, not thanked, not praised for their foresight or their flasks. They go in, the door closes behind them, and the story loses all interest in them. The one sentence the bridegroom utters, he utters to the five on the wrong side of the door. If you had nothing to go by but his words, you would say the parable was about them.

I do not think this is nothing. Matthew gives the same sentence twice more, and both times to people who were calling him Lord. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, to those who prophesied and cast out devils in his name: *I never knew you*. And in the courtyard of the high priest, in the mouth of Peter, warming himself at the fire: *I know not the man*, said twice, the second time with an oath. The formula of the shut door is the formula of Peter's denial. The bridegroom says to the foolish virgins what Peter said about him. It is a strange thing to put in his mouth. Matthew put it there.

Commentators have heard in *I know you not* something more formal than coldness: a sentence of dismissal, the words with which a teacher disowns a pupil and strikes him from the school. If so, the refusal is real, and I want it to be real; nothing that follows depends on softening it. It also tightens the knot with the courtyard. Peter's denial is that same sentence of disowning, turned by the pupil against the master.

What is not in the text

Now what the parable does not say. It does not say the foolish were cast into outer darkness. Matthew has a phrase for that, and he is not shy of it: *weeping and gnashing of teeth*, six times in his Gospel, of the man without a wedding garment three chapters earlier and of the slothful servant in the very next parable, where it falls like a gavel. Here he withholds it. There is a shut door and a voice. Nothing else. The parable stops with the foolish outside and the bridegroom speaking to them, and it does not tell us what happened next.

The deacon's line, they knocked and it was not opened, is two texts laid one over the other. *Knock, and it shall be opened unto you* is Matthew 7:7. The shut door is Matthew 25:10. He set the first on top of the second and read it backwards: here, he said, is the case where the knocking fails. But Matthew did not write that. He wrote *knock, and it shall be opened* in one place and a shut door in another, and left it to the reader to carry the one across to the other. The usual sermon carries nothing across. It reads the shut door as the last word and fills the silence with our own smallness, because a door that stays shut on the undeserving is the kind of door we understand, having shut a few.

Let me say plainly that I am not denying judgment. There is a door, and it shuts, and the parable is a warning and was told as one; the Church reads it in November, with the leaves down, for a reason. What I deny is that the text tells us the end of the story of the five outside. It gives us one sentence and then it stops. The parable is aporetic. It leaves us standing at the door with them, in the dark, and the lamps in their hands are burning. For notice: they went to buy, and they came back, so somebody sold them oil at midnight, which is itself a small providence. When the door shuts, the wise and their flasks are on the far side of it, out of sight. The only lamps still visible in the parable's last scene are the foolish virgins', lit from an unexpected source, just in time.

What oil is

Before going further I want to look at the oil itself, because the whole parable turns on it and we always hurry past it to what it means. Lamp oil in Palestine was olive oil, and olive oil is fat: three long chains of carbon, each tied to one small molecule of glycerol, like three ribbons knotted to one hand. I described the same molecule in the essay on soap, because soap is made of it too. Boil the fat with lye and the knots come undone: the chains become soap, and the hand, glycerol, slips free into the water. That is one thing you can do with a fat. The other is to burn it.

When a wick draws oil up into a flame, the heat cracks the chains, and the fragments of carbon, glowing in the air for the instant before they are consumed, give the yellow light. The light of a lamp is the burning of what the olive made. And what the olive made, it made out of sunlight, in a summer that is over, by the slow chemistry of its leaves, and laid up in the fruit against a future it would not live to see. Every lamp is a small resurrection. It gives back, in the dark, light that fell on a tree a year ago, or ten years ago, or, if the oil has been kept well, longer. Oil is the stored sunlight of a life that has ended.

So the two things you can do with a fat answer to two ends, as the soap essay said of its bar: break it, and it cleans; keep it whole and burn it, and it gives light. The parable is at a wedding, at night, and the end is light. Zechariah saw the whole arrangement in a vision: a lampstand of gold, two olive trees standing beside it, and the oil running from the trees into the lamps through golden pipes; and when he asked what the two trees were he was told, *These are the two anointed ones, that stand by the Lord of the whole earth*. The oil comes from the anointed. *Christos* means anointed. The lamp burns him.

And a lamp holds very little. The bowl of a clay lamp burns for an hour or two; the flask the wise carried was the reserve against his delay. The foolish did not lack lamps, and they did not lack faith; they went out into the night to meet him. What they lacked was the stored past. They brought themselves, and nothing else.

Two wisdoms

Matthew calls the five with flasks *phronimoi*, and I will not take the word from them. It is the word for the man who built his house on the rock, and for the faithful steward, and the evangelist means it as praise. But it is a particular kind of wisdom. *Phronēsis* is prudence: the practical reason that looks ahead, provides, and keeps something back. It is the wisdom Our Lord praises in the unjust steward, when he says *the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light*, and the same word is in that sentence. When the foolish ask for oil and the wise answer, *Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves*, that is not malice. That is prudence talking. It is also, word for word, what prudence always says.

But I should not let them off so lightly. That refusal is the only speech the wise are given in the whole parable, and what it refuses is the one thing the Gospel commands without any condition at all: *Give to him that asketh thee*. Look, too, at the hour they say it. The cry has already gone up, *Behold, the bridegroom cometh*; he is on his way, and they have been told to go out and meet him; the vigil they provisioned for is over. And still they cannot put the reserve down. The prudence that was right at nine o'clock is clutching its flask at midnight with the bridegroom coming up the road. The wise deny the foolish at the very moment their carrying has stopped being needed.

And then they go in, and are given no word. Nothing in the text says they were greeted, or thanked, or loved. It says they went in, and the door was shut. I do not claim that as a judgment; Matthew does not

make it one. But a reader is allowed to notice that the bridegroom's only words go to the empty-handed, and his only silence to the well-provided.

The other five are called *mōrai*. It is the word Paul uses of himself: *we are fools for Christ's sake*, *mōroi*. I will not pretend the parable intends the compliment; Matthew's other fool is the man who built on sand, and his house fell, and great was the fall of it. But look at what their folly consisted in. They did not plan for his delay. They went out to meet a bridegroom with a lamp and no reserve, as if he would come when he said and the lamp would see them through. Their folly was to take the promise of his coming at its word and bring nothing of their own to cover the gap. Call it what it was: an abandonment to his arrival. It is imprudent. It is also the posture of every saint who ever set out with nothing, and it is what Our Lord asked of the Twelve when he sent them out without purse or scrip or two coats.

So there are two wisdoms in the parable, and the text rewards one of them with the feast and gives the other a word. The prudent bring the past; they carry in a flask light that fell on an olive tree in another year, and they are right to, and they go in. The fools bring only the present, which is to say only themselves, and are left at the door. And then he speaks to them.

The ending the parable does not give

Now the liberty, marked as one. *I know you not* is a refusal, and in the formal sense I have mentioned, a disowning. But the plain words are also, in every language there is, how an acquaintance begins. I do not know you. Then tell me who you are. The parable breaks off at exactly the point where a conversation would start, and I think the break is the point. Matthew leaves the door shut and the sentence hanging in the air, and does not say what the five answered.

If we must supply what they answered, we should supply it from the portrait of Christ the Gospels paint, not from our own experience of doors. And that portrait is not ambiguous about names. *I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. He calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out.* In the garden, a woman weeping at a shut tomb takes him for the gardener until he says one word, *Mary*, and her eyes are opened. Zacchaeus is called by name down out of a tree. Simon is given a new one. To be known by name is, in this Gospel and the others, the whole of what it means to be his.

So the secret ending, the one I would write if the parable asked me for one, is that the five said their names. *I know you not.* Lord, I am so-and-so, daughter of so-and-so, from such a village, and I came out to meet you with a lamp and no oil, because I thought you would come when you said. And he knew them by name. That is not in the text. It fits the Christ of the text better than the gnashing of teeth, which is not in the text either. Of the two eisegeses, I will take the one that looks like him.

And it is not quite a supplement from outside, because it has already happened once, to the first man who said the sentence. Peter said *I know not the man* by a fire in a courtyard, three times. Not many days later, by another fire, on a beach at dawn, the risen Lord turned to him and said, *Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou*

me? Three times. A name, a father's name, and a question. The sentence of disowning was answered, inside the Gospels, by the conversation of being known: the man who had said he did not know the master was called by his own name until he could say, *Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee*. The secret ending of the parable is the ending of Peter. It is in the text after all; only it is written in another chapter, by another evangelist's hand.

Read this way, the two halves of the parable do not quarrel. The wise go in on the strength of what they carried, and they are right, and the feast is real. The foolish go in, if they go in, on the strength of being known, with no reserve in their hands, only a flame bought at midnight, which is the only way anyone finally goes in. The flask is a good thing to have. It is not the thing that is loved.

Watch

Matthew's moral stands: watch. But notice that nobody in the parable watched. All ten slept. The wise were not more wakeful; they were better provisioned. The parable is not about the length of the vigil but about the moment of waking, and what you have on you when the cry goes up. And on that the text gives two answers, not one. Have oil: the stored light of a life handed down to you, the past kept against the delay, the inheritance in its flask. And if at midnight you find you have none, take what light is given you from wherever it comes, go to the door anyway, and when he says he does not know you, tell him your name.

I am a canonist and a layman and no preacher, and this is offered as food for thought, the way the reflections on this page always are. The deacon gave the moral Matthew gave. I only wanted to say that the text ends sooner than his sermon did, and that in the space it leaves open, the Christ of the rest of the Gospel is the better guide to what happened next.

SOURCES Matthew 25:1–13 (the Gospel of the thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A); the formula at Mt 7:22–23 and 26:70–74; *weeping and gnashing of teeth* at Mt 8:12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30; *phronimos* at Mt 7:24, 24:45 and Lk 16:8; *mōros* at Mt 7:26 and 1 Cor 4:10; Mt 5:42; Mt 10:9–10; Mt 25:6; Zechariah 4:1–14; John 10:3, 14; 18:18; 20:16; 21:9, 15–17; Luke 19:5. The reading of *I know you not* as a formula of dismissal is a commentators' suggestion, given here as such. Scripture in the Authorized Version. On the chemistry of fats and their burning, see the soap essay and its sources; the lamp and the flask as Palestinian clay lamps of the period are commonly described. A personal reflection; the ending supplied in the fifth section is marked as the writer's own and is not in the text.

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