**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**MATTHEW-116**. **THE WAITING MAIDENS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. 2. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. 3. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: 4. But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. 5. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. 6. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. 7. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. 8. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. 9. But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. 10. And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut. 11 Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. 12. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. 13. Watch therefore; for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh."*

*Matthew 25:1-13*

We shall best understand this beautiful but difficult parable if we look on to its close. Our Lord appends to it the refrain of all this context, the exhortation to watch, based upon our ignorance of the time of His coming. But as in the former little parable of the wise servant it was his faithful, wise dispensing of his lord's goods, and not his watchfulness, which was the point of the eulogium passed on him, so here it is the readiness of the wise virgins to take their places in the wedding march which is commended. That readiness consists in their having their lamps burning and their oil in store. This, then, is the main thing in the parable. It is an exhibition, under another aspect, of what constitutes fitness for entrance into the festal chamber of the bridegroom, which had just been set forth as consisting in faithful stewardship. Here it is presented as being the possession of lamp and oil.

**I. The first consideration, then, must be, What is the meaning of these emblems?**

A great deal of fine-spun ingenuity has been expended on subordinate points in the parable, such as the significance of the number of maidens, the conclusions from the equal division into wise and foolish, the place from which they came to meet the bridegroom, the point in the marriage procession where they are supposed to join it, whether it was at going to fetch the bride, or at coming back with her; whether the feast is held in her house, or in his, and so on. But all these are unimportant questions, and as Christ has left them in the background, we only destroy the perspective by dragging them into the front. In no parable is it more important than in this to restrain the temptation to run out analogies into their last results. The remembrance that the virgins, as the emblem of the whole body of the visible Church, are the same as the bride, who does not appear in the parable, might warn against such an error. They were ten, as being the usual number for such a company, or as being the round number naturally employed when definiteness was not sought. They were divided equally, not because our Lord desired to tell, but because He wished to leave unnoticed, the numerical proportion of the two classes. One set are wiseand the other foolish, because He wishes to show not only the sin, but the absurdity, of unreadiness, and to teach us that true wisdom is not of the head only, but far more of the heart. The conduct of the two groups of maidens is looked at from the prudent and common-sense standpoint, and the provident action of the one sets in relief the reckless stupidity of the other.

There have been many opinions as to the meaning of the lamps and the oil, which it is needless to repeat. Surely the analogy of scriptural symbolism is our best guide. If we follow it, we get a meaning which perfectly suits the emblems and the whole parable. In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord uses the same figure of the lamp, and explains it: Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works.

**II. Note the sleep of all the virgins.**

No blame is hinted on account of it. It is not inconsistent with the wisdom of the wise, nor does it interfere with their readiness to meet the bridegroom. It is, then, such a sleep as is compatible with watching. Our Lord's introduction of this point is an example of His merciful allowance for our weakness. There must be a certain slackening of the tension of expectation when the bridegroom tarries. Centuries of delay cannot but modify the attitude of the waiting Church, and Jesus here implies that there will be a long stretch of time before His advent, during which all His people will feel the natural effect of the deferring of hope. But the sleep which He permits, unblamed, is light, and such as one takes by snatches when waiting to be called. He does not ask us always to be on tiptoe of expectation, nor to refuse the teaching of experience; but counts that we have watched aright, if we wake from our light slumbers when the cry is heard, and have our lamps lit, ready for the procession.

**III. Then comes the midnight cry and the waking of the maidens.**

The hour, of night's black arch the keystone, suggests the unexpectedness of His coming; the loudness of the cry, its all-awaking effect; the broken words of the true reading, Behold the bridegroom!the closeness on the heels of the heralds with which the procession flashes through the darkness. The virgins had gone forth to meet himat the beginning of the parable, but the going forth to which they are now summoned is not the same. The Christian soul goes forth once when, at the beginning of its Christian life, it forsakes the world to wait for and on Christ, and again, when it leaves the world to pass with Him into the banquet. Life is the slumber from which some are awaked by the voice of death, and some who remainshall be awaked by the trumpet of judgment. There is no interval between the cry and the appearance of the bridegroom; only a moment to rouse themselves, to look to their lamps, and to speak the hurried words of the foolish and the answer of the wise, and then the procession is upon them. It is all done as in a flash, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. This impression of swiftness, which leaves no time for delayed preparation, is the uniform impression conveyed by all the Scripture references to the coming of the Lord. The swoop of the eagle, the fierce blaze of lightning from one side of the sky to the other, the bursting of the flood, that morning's work at Sodom, not begun till dawn and finished before the sun was risen on the earth, are its types. Foolish indeed to postpone preparation till that moment when cry and coming are simultaneous, like lightning and thunder right overhead!

The foolish virginsimploring request and its answer are not to be pressed, as if they meant more than to set forth the hopelessness of then attempting to procure the wanting oil, and especially the hopelessness of attempting to get it from one's fellows. There is a world of suppressed terror and surprise in that cry, Our lamps are going out. Note that they burned till the bridegroom came, and then, like the magic lamps in old legends, at his approach shivered into darkness. Is not that true of the formal, outward religion, which survives everything but contact with His all-seeing eye and perfect judgment? These foolish maidens were as much astonished as alarmed at seeing their lights flicker down to extinction; and it is possible for professing Christians to live a lifetime, and never to be found out either by themselves or by anybody else. But if there has been no oil in the lamp, it will be quenched when He appears. The atmosphere that surrounds His throne acts like oxygen on the oil-fed flame, and like carbonic acid gas on the other.

The answer of the wise is not selfishness. It is not from our fellows, however bright their lamps, that we can ever get that inward grace. None of them has more than suffices for his own needs, nor can any give it to another. It may be bought, on the same terms as the pearl of great price was bought, without money; but the market is closed, as on a holiday, on the day of the king's son's marriage. That is not touched upon here, except in so far as it is hinted at in the absence of the foolish when he enters the banqueting chamber, and in their fruitless prayer. They had no time to get the oil before he came, and they had not got it when they returned. The lesson is plain. We can only get the new life of the Spirit, which will make our lives a light, from God; and we can get it now, not then.

**IV. We see the wise virgins within and the foolish without.**

They are, indeed, no longer designated by these adjectives, but as readyand the others; for preparedness is fitness, and they who are found of Him in possession of the outward righteousness and of its inward source, His own divine life in them, are prepared. To such the gates of the festal chamber fly open. In that day, place is the outcome of character, and it is equally impossible for the readyto be shut out, and for the othersto go in.

When the bridegroom with his feastful friends passes to bliss at the mid hour of night, they who have filled their odorous lamps with deeds of lighthave surely gained their entrance. There is silence as to the unspeakable joys of the wedding feast. Some faint sounds of music and dancing, some gleams from the lighted windows, find their way out; but the closed door keeps its secret, and only the guests know the gladness.

That closed door means security, perpetuity, untold blessedness, but it means exclusion too. The piteous reiterated call of the shut-out maidens, roused too late, and so suddenly, from songs and laughter to vain cries, evokes a stern answer, through which shines the awful reality veiled in the parable. We do not need to regard the prayer for entrance, and its refusal, as conveying more than the fruitlessness of wishes for entrance then, when unaccompanied with fitness to enter. Such desire as is expressed in this passionate beating at the closed door, with hoarse entreaties, is not fitness. If it were, the door would open; and the reason why it does not lies in the bridegroom's awful answer, I know you not. The absence of the qualification prevents his recognising them as his. Surely the unalleviated darkness of a hopeless exclusion settles down on these sad five, standing, huddled together, at the door, with the extinguished lamps hanging in their despairing hands. Too late, too late, ye cannot enter now. The wedding bell has become a funeral knell. They were not the enemies of the bridegroom, they thought themselves his friends. They let life ebb without securing the one thing needful, and the neglect was irremediable. There is a tragedy underlying many a life of outward religiousness and inward emptiness, and a dreadful discovery will flare in upon such, when they have to say to themselves,

This might have been once,

And we missed it, lost it for ever.