

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska.
Message from Rev. Israel Portilla-Gómez, Associate Rector
November 12, 2023.

Scripture readings

Wisdom 6: 12-16; Psalm 70: 1-6; 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18; **Matthew 25:1-13**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)



The Parable of the Ten Virgins. Image taken from <https://www.gospelimages.com/>

The parable we hear in today's gospel appears only in the evangelist Matthew. It is addressed to the new Judeo-Christians. The kingdom of God is compared to a wedding. I will spend 90 percent of my sermon talking about weddings of Jesus time. People knew what weddings were like very well. It was not like getting married in Las Vegas. We must understand the context because weddings have changed significantly in the last 2000 years. Let's see what the process was like.

1. It was about age. About 18 years of age for a man (if his family had enough resources), or older with sufficient financial stability, as is assumed in the case of Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus. For a woman, the age for getting married began between 13 and 14 years old. Life expectancy at that time was probably between 30-40 years.

2. It was about an agreement. In most cases, marriages were arranged by parents for their children, although sometimes their consent was also considered. However, the conception of marriage in the first place was a matter of survival and unity between families. The concept of love and romance was not the most important reason for marriage. A romantic relationship starts with this agreement.

The groom's father, or adult man, had to ask for the bride's hand in marriage. He acted as her legal representative since the bride was considered her father's property. The two men established a legal

agreement, known as betrothal or engagement. The agreement was made by drinking from the same glass of wine while saying a blessing.

3. It was about what happened after the formal engagement. The couple had to wait a year for the wedding. The promised husband or groom-to-be could not have contact with the promised wife or bride-to-be. He could only see her from afar; he couldn't meet her. If the contract was broken, it was considered a divorce. If there was adultery on the part of the woman, the customary punishment was stoning. Hence, Mary could have had a tragic outcome because she was already engaged to Joseph.

At that time, families negotiated dowry. The payment was made in recognition of the loss suffered by the bride's family. The legal minimum was 200 work days for a maid, 100 for a widow, and 400 for a priest's daughter. These values could vary by mutual agreement. The groom also had to offer a place to live, and the common thing was a new room in his parent's house or a new house and favorable economic conditions to ensure the upbringing of children. When the negotiations were ready and the dowry paid, the wedding proceeded.

4. The wedding. The favorite wedding time was fall, when the crops were ready and people were in rest mode. On the eve of the wedding, the guests went to the bride's house. The groom was dressed in splendid clothes at his house, accompanied by his friends. He had to arrive at the bride's house half an hour before midnight, guided by his male friends. He was received by a procession of bridesmaids, friends of the bride, who accompanied the groom to the place where the bride was waiting for him, dressed in white, with a veil that covered her head and face. The bride was carried on a litter and in a procession. The guests were singing wedding songs that were traditionally known. Lamps were essential to guide the way.

When the procession arrived at the groom's house, his parents granted a traditional blessing. Afterwards, the night was spent playing games and dancing, with the groom participating in the festivities. But the bride would retire with her bridesmaids, usually 10 of them, and other female friends to another room assigned to her.

The next day was the wedding party. There was food, wine, music, singing, and a kind of public holiday in the town. The guests presented their gifts.

At night, the groom came to where the bride was, and the two recited specific texts from the Songs of Solomon. Afterward, they received blessings from religious leaders.

The party continued with everyone together. The bride removed her veil, the couple disappeared to a private place prepared for them, the groom gave gifts to the bride, and the marriage was consummated.

The next morning, the bride and groom's families were to determine whether the marriage had been successfully consummated. The celebrations lasted between 5 to 7 days.

Thus, we can see that a wedding is an essential celebratory and joyful event even if some customs might seem outdated to our modern minds. Would you not like to participate in a wedding like that for a week, either as a couple or as a guest?

The parable is an allegory to the second coming of Christ, theologically called the parousia. The bridegroom is Jesus Christ. The bridesmaids represent Christian communities. The oil refers to good deeds. The bride is not mentioned, but it is assumed that she is the entire Church under the new sovereignty of God, where there is celebration and joy. The first Christians believed that the second

visit of Jesus Christ was imminent and very close, and they wanted to be prepared in a certain way. So, the parable is a reminder and invitation to maintain oil in our lamps by continuing to pray together, serve others, do good, be kind, compassionate, and fair daily, and do all those things joyfully. Amen.