

The wise and foolish virgins

(Matthew 25:1-13)

“Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. 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. 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. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.”

The first obvious lesson of the parable is the need for continual consecration, but we cannot finally leave it there, because it is so plain that it illustrates far more than appears at a first reading. Great teachers like Jesus and Mrs Eddy, being divinely inspired, covered all the levels of human thinking and embraced the human need for guidance at every one of those levels. Naturally all the parables in the Gospels should be taken initially in their plain, straight lesson and followed accordingly, but the man who spoke them was a man who in his own life admitted no process towards good, but rather the ever-presence of good as the manifestation of his Father or divine Principle.

THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS

Should we not therefore look for the signs of that higher level of thinking where he always held himself, and should we not bear in mind that he said, "no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven"?

The story of this parable is that ten virgins take their lamps and prepare to meet the bridegroom. Those who have oil in their lamps are those who have what the Bible calls the "oil of gladness". The definition of "oil" in the "Glossary" of "Science and Health" is "Consecration; charity; gentleness; prayer; heavenly inspiration" (S&H 592:25-26). Those who tend and feed their understanding with the oil of consecration, charity, gentleness, prayer, and heavenly inspiration are always prepared for the midnight call; they are never caught off beat. Those who have the ability, but are not tending it, may find themselves unable to respond immediately when the call comes and are therefore shut out from experiencing the joy of realization and demonstration. If they succumb to the suggestion that they must go away and consecrate their life to the spiritual for a period of time until their lamps are filled with the oil of gladness and inspiration, then they miss the boat. The remedy therefore does not lie in believing that *they* are the source of light and inspiration and that their negligence can consequently affect the issue. They have it in their power to correct that suggestion and to realize that Mind is always fully present and always expressing itself through them without any need of premeditated reasoning. Their negligence can have no effect unless they believe it can and they submit to a belief in a process of "four months" before the "harvest". Jesus himself asked, "Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? Behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest". Consequently he could only have been showing people through this parable that if they believed that inspiration was generated by themselves, then indeed the wise virgins would have the experience of enjoying the bridegroom's presence and those who dwelt with their lack of wisdom would *not* have that experience. But if those called the foolish virgins became wise enough to see where wisdom originates and to admit that they were the

expression of wisdom, then by that very admission they would have a more real encounter with the joy of accomplishment symbolized by the bridegroom. In other words, when the midnight call came which according to mortal standards would be a cry of mortal mind, but would actually be the presence of some phase of the divine Mind awaiting recognition, then those who had proved for themselves that that presence of the divine Mind was their true selfhood would not merely be ready, as the other students were. They would also be furnished with the qualities of instantaneity and of healing through the Spirit rather than through mere argument.

Looked at in this light, the only criticism levelled against the foolish virgins was that they thought they had to *get* oil, either by borrowing it or begging for help from some other apparently wiser individuals, or else through going away to purchase it by turning to the spiritual channels where it can be acquired. This very attitude of "getting" was what caused them to be shut out from the bridal chamber. A reversal of this attitude, based on the teachings of the Master, would not only have ushered them into the bridal chamber, but from that very acceptance of the processes of divinity would have better equipped them to enjoy the fruition of the continual presence of the bridegroom, or the Christ-idea.

Whether any one of us is a wise or foolish virgin, the call comes to go up higher. The midnight hour when the bridegroom arrives indicates the end of one phase and the beginning of a new phase with all its opportunities of demonstration and joy. When the call comes, the response is either "I'm not equal to this, I'm not prepared, I feel quite inadequate" or else the very good and in itself wonderful response, "Yes, I can help, because I have kept close to the spiritual and have consecrated myself to study". But it is open to every individual to recognize that he can at any time fulfil the purpose set before him. Whatever he is called upon to do, he is already prepared to fulfil, not because of any human ability, but through natural spiritual reflection. If this were not so, we should not have a Mind continually manifesting intelligence. "Man is God's image and likeness; whatever is possible to God, is possible to man *as God's reflection*. Through the

THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS

transparency of Science we learn this, and receive it: learn that man can fulfil the Scriptures in every instance; that if he open his mouth it shall be filled — not by reason of the schools, or learning, but by the natural ability, that reflection already has bestowed on him, to give utterance to Truth” (Mis. 183:12-19).

The foolish virgins thought they were caught out, but no one can be caught out in Science, since whatever we meet, Principle has prepared us to meet. That is the perfect operation of the perfect Principle.

If through ignorance our oil is not of a lasting quality and our lamps go out and fail us, we can still have instant recourse to the facts of Science. So whilst we must not disregard the necessity of buying oil, it is also true that if through our neglect or through lack of time we have not purchased oil, we still have entry to the world in which Jesus lived — the availability and immediacy of good. We can, without time or the necessity of study, but with a clear understanding of what man is as the expression of God, enjoy immediately the blessings open to such a being. “Mind is not necessarily dependent upon educational processes. It possesses of itself all beauty and poetry, and the power of expressing them . . . Eloquence re-echoes the strains of Truth and Love. It is due to inspiration rather than to erudition . . . If one believes that he cannot be an orator without study or a super-induced condition, the body responds to this belief, and the tongue grows mute” (S&H 89:18-20; 88:26-27; 89:14-16).

So the rule is to consecrate our lives to learning and living the requirements of Principle, but realize that even with all this and with the best we can do, we may well feel caught out by a lack of oil in meeting a particular situation. Therefore whether we have not studied at all or studied a great deal, our only line of relief and certainty is to accept the teaching of Jesus as to the full presence of perfection. If we do this, we have thrown ourselves down at the feet of that Love which gives the whole atmosphere of Science; and we are at once blessed in the ratio of our falling wholeheartedly into the arms of this fact of divine Love and its ever-presence in the expression of itself as ourselves and all mankind.

When the foolish virgins turned to the wise and said, "Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out", the wise virgins replied, "Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves". In those words they spelt out their own limitations. If we feel that through time and consecration we are better equipped than someone else, we are indulging in a mild form of malpractice. We are also forgetting the Master's declaration, "ye shall be brought before governors and kings [that is, anything in human experience which tries to dominate and rule your thinking by its apparent authority] for my sake . . . But when they deliver you up, take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you". Again, when Jesus taught in the Temple, we read that "the Jews marvelled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned? Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but His that sent me".

The wise virgins were prepared, so we must give credit where credit is due, but they relied on that preparedness. If at any time circumstances caused them to neglect their studies, they would automatically place themselves in a position as hopeless as the position which *they* felt the foolish virgins were in, for if we think wrongly in any degree of someone else, we throw the door wide open for that wrongness to become applicable to ourselves.

The foolish virgins shut the door on the bridegroom through self-condemnation. Consecration to the spiritual does not make anyone more spiritual, but only more aware of the spirituality he already has. The so-called foolish virgins had spirituality, but had allowed a false teaching to tell them that there were times when they had not. The so-called wise virgins recognized their own spirituality, but were parochial and selfish and believed what could never be true — that good was finite and so there was not enough oil for them *and* the others (although the spiritual always grows by sharing). In one sense they represented a mistake of reasoning as much as the others, who thought that they had not got spirituality. In both cases the truth was

THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS

that they had it "pressed down, and running over". The lesson is that on the one hand we should not condemn those who think they do not have what in actual fact they must have as children of the same Parent; and on the other hand we should not congratulate ourselves on our spirituality if we have lost its whole import by making it finite and being possessive about it. We all need to recognize our present spirituality and therefore that we have sufficient for every requirement. That sufficiency means too that we have all we need in order to share and give without any possibility of depletion.

The Master's saying, "whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance", rebukes the sense of a process towards perfection, and he underlines the danger of believing in a process when he goes on, "but whosoever hath not [that is, *thinks* he has not], from him shall be taken away even that he hath". Naturally this does not mean that we have no need to study all that Mrs Eddy says, for we certainly do need to do this, but the best attitude to have when studying "Science and Health" and the other writings is to regard them as telling us where we already *are* and what we already *have*, in all its detailed magnificence. You have to be in London and know you are in London in order to enjoy a guidebook to London.

Both groups were virgins in this parable, and that term may have been used to indicate not only purity of thought but also inexperience of the world's challenges. The number "ten" introduces a tone of morality, as in the general interpretation of the ten Commandments, and both groups of virgins had the moral sense that man needs time and process in order to fit himself for perfection. The so-called wise virgins were tainted by an egotistical opinion of their own qualifications, which caused them to condemn those not fulfilling their limited conditions for perfection. To them purity was represented by the accumulation of the letter. What was important to them was the oil, the acquisition of understanding, but this state of thought needs the love which that oil should have generated, so that the need of another individual is immediately seen and met.

Those who consecrate thought to the spiritual through study and even more through daily admissions of the presence of good in all

things do have the joy of the continual coming of the bridegroom in fresh revelation, but they are mistaken if they believe this to be the only path which leads to revelation. A child who has never studied at all will often accept or express truths both profound and filled with joy and healing. No man can outline how Principle will work, but every man can admit that Principle *is* working in the activities of good all the time and decide for himself that he will adopt every means available in order to feel and know that this is true, thereby experiencing the benefits which await him as a result.

What makes it true that a newcomer to Science more often experiences an instantaneous healing than does a so-called advanced student? Only the ability to accept and receive without a belief in time and process. Oh, to be flexible enough to be willing to accept perfection now!

It was the clear recognition of the equality of all men in their perfect expression as ideas of Principle which provided Jesus with his supreme understanding of every man, no matter where the individual believed he was. To him there was no one above or below the datum line of perfection, and Love had to have its largesse in order to be Love. That which is infinite can have no touch or sense associated with finity. "All" has never heard or known of lack, and the nature of every idea derives from the Mind which is All-in-all.

Had the Master had a mind which could have interpreted this parable as we usually do, then to be consistent he would in the incident of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-12) have had to praise the Pharisees, who had at least some glimpse of the spiritual and the requirements of the moral; and he would have had to condemn the adulterous woman, who appeared to have no oil in her lamp. But Jesus levelled the whole thing out onto the Christ plane where every valley is exalted, every mountain of egotism brought low, and all are led to the fact of reality that each one is perfect now, without the need of processes towards that perfection. As this levelling came into expression, the woman was lifted up and the Pharisees given the touch of true humility. Both she and they entered the bridal chamber in the way which was right for **them**.

THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS

The parable ends, "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh". If you watch rightly by watching Truth above all, you know that the Son of man is always with you and that you need only watch that you do not accept as real the arguments of mortal mind. Then without your knowing the day or hour the Son of man (that is, the spiritual idea applicable to your requirement at that time) *will* come to you.

Too often we close the door on the bridegroom either through sloth or through a conviction that our progress depends on the amount of study we do. Study we should, but not with our eye on the amount of oil it will give us, but only because of our love of it and the joy it gives us. If at any time we believe that our lack of study has caused a lack of oil in our lamps, we can silence this reasoning of mortal mind with a better understanding as to who provides the oil, for it is certainly not ourselves.

Again, we sometimes close the door by saying, "I haven't a hope, I have only just started and I don't understand clearly. I can't possibly grasp ideas of God". What the Christ says is, "I do not know that sort of argument. You are perfect now and have the oil now and therefore watch, so that whenever the suggestion comes that you haven't the oil, you say, 'Liar, you are talking to Mind and not to me'. 'It shall be given to you in that same hour what ye shall speak.'"

The bridegroom is always present and asking of you only the alertness to receive and accept. All the limits went for Mrs Eddy when she experienced what she called "the heart's bridal to more spiritual existence". "When the door opened, I was waiting and watching; and, lo, the bridegroom came! The character of the Christ was illuminated by the midnight torches of Spirit. My heart knew its Redeemer. He whom my affections had diligently sought was as the One 'altogether lovely', as 'the chiefest', the only, 'among ten thousand'. Soulless famine had fled. Agnosticism, pantheism, and theosophy were void. Being was beautiful, its substance, cause, and currents were God and His idea. I had touched the hem of Christian Science" (Ret. 23:13-24).

Is not the deeper lesson from the story of the ten virgins twofold?

First of all, yes, it is right to study and consecrate thought to having oil in our lamp, but if we do this on the basis of personal gain and then meet someone who believes he has not the oil and we turn him away, instead of supplying his need, then surely we should examine the quality of the oil which we feel we have in our lamp. So on the one hand we can be alert to the egotism of thinking that through study we have the oil, when Christian Science "rests on the conception of God as the only Life, substance, and intelligence, and excludes the human mind as a spiritual factor in the healing work" (S&H 185:18-21). Secondly, if we feel when we meet an emergency or a call upon us that through neglect or lack of time or experience we have not the necessary oil, we can cast off this subtle form of egotism, belittling ourselves as God's idea, and acknowledge fully that we are the expression of the one Mind. That Mind is making the call for which it has equipped us to supply the answer.

The parable tells us that the virgins "all slumbered and slept", and this must show that we should never become complacent or egotistical through belief in our own abilities, nor should we become derogatory and negative about ourselves through belief in our inabilities. It is wise to watch that we do not fall asleep about either of these claims, but keep alert to dismiss both self-satisfaction and self-depreciation. Devotion and longing, coupled with a childlike trust in the ever-presence of good, will always lead the individual into the heavenly experience described by Mrs Eddy and so, like her, he will find that being is beautiful and that "its substance, cause, and currents" are God and His idea.