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"NEW WINE INTO NEW WINESKINS"

Passages of Gospels considered:

- Mk 2, 13-17 (the calling of Levi)
- Mk 2, 18-22 (fasting)
- Mt 25, 1-13 (the Ten Virgins)

In depth Biblical Study by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

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*Transposition of an audio-recording **not reviewed by the author***

Note: *the transposition is liberal, incidental errors may be due to the difference between oral and written language and punctuation has been made by ear..*

The subject of this conference is "new wine into new wineskins", like Mark suggests. Together with the new liturgical year, which started with the Advent, the liturgical reading of Mark's Gospel begins, too. In this meeting, which is by nature very brief, we want to get the main concepts of this Gospel, which is the most ancient of the four.

The Gospel of Mark begins with this expression: "*The beginning of the gospel*" - you know that the term Gospel (eÜaggšlion) means "the good news" - "*about Jesus Christ, the Son of God*". (Mk 1,1). So the Gospel of Mark wants to let us understand how this good news arose.

What is this good news all about?

It comes out while reading the gospel - particularly the passage that we will analyze together - and especially by noticing some 'great absences'.

It's something sensational: in the Gospel of Mark the word "Law" doesn't exist.

What is the Law?

Jews were used to describe it as the set of the first five Books of the Bible, those that were thought to be written by Moses, that is from Genesis to Deuteronomy, where all indications, regulations, precepts and commandments were included, those people had to obey in order to be agreeable before God. This is the only Gospel, the most ancient - the others have rounded off some corners for good living together while that of Mark is the most rough - where the word Law is absent, for the good news of Jesus is inconsistent with Law.

Jesus - and this is a good news - begins a relationship with God which is completely new: it is not based on obeying laws, precepts or commandments, but on resemblance to his love.

With Jesus Law becomes useless and harmful. A relationship with God based on Law didn't allow a full community. Why? Law is a set of regulations which arose in different times from the ones of the common experience of people and maybe it didn't take into consideration the needs and the different sensitivities of people.

It was imposed as a set of rules that had to be obeyed. No matter if someone could experience a particular situation or life condition; no way, you had to obey.

This Law didn't allow a full relationship with God and was primarily the cause of suffering for people: they had to suffer in order to obey very old laws,

written much time before, in different social backgrounds and conditions. Jesus came to eliminate all that. The relationship with God is not based on obeying Law anymore, but on resembling to his love: no more obedience, but resemblance, so that the individual can evolve.

Let's start with the first episode which is programmatic of the entire Gospel - the way in which Jesus expresses this new relationship with God completely upsets people's life. This will be a really good news for all those who live outside Law, the so called "sinners" or "misbelievers", people that don't want or are not able to obey Law and feel loved by God, apart from their behavior or obedience.

But this same news can be a complete failure for those who live a relationship with God which is based on adherence to rules. We will see people's reaction then.

The episode that gave rise to Jesus' teaching "new wine must go into new wineskins" (Mk 2, 13-17) is the one in which Jesus, after having called the disciples, calls a completely different individual, who was thought to be completely excluded from salvation: a tax collector (telènhj).

Tax collectors were considered unclean because it was a job which favored robbery. They were serving Herod Antipas, a pagan official, so they were considered unclean.

Tax collectors were the ones who, even after repentance, would not be saved. Well, Jesus calls one of them.

All Gospels have the same message, even if they express it in quite different ways. In Matthew's Gospel this tax collector is called Matthew, in Mark's one he is called Levi Son of Alphaeus, but it's the same person that Jesus calls.

Why those different names then?

Names are different but the concept that the evangelist wants to express is the same:

- Matthew, in Hebrew "Mattatia", means "gift of God", that is that the calling of Jesus doesn't depend upon man's merits - "Look, how he's good! How he is nice! How he is saint!" - but it's a free love gift on behalf of God. Jesus calls an individual apart from his merits.
- Levi Son of Alphaeus. The name Levi recalls one of the tribes of Israel that was out of the dividing up of the Kingdom of Israel, it was the tribe without land.

The evangelist wants us to comprehend that those excluded from God by religion or morality, those who cannot or don't want to live a religious community with God, are surely reached by a calling, as a free gift on behalf of God.

Jesus calls a official sinner, a known one, and tells him to follow him. He does. If Jesus was a religious person, this sinner would have been asked to go and attend spiritual courses, to fast, to be purified or to pray first, in order to obtain his forgiveness and be part of his group.

The evangelist writes "*While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house*". Starting from the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, from the very first verses, Jesus is the revelation of God.

The first thing that Jesus does after having called a sinner to follow him, the first time that Jesus, that is God, meets a sinner, he has dinner with him.

There's something very dangerous here, something that shakes all religion fundamentals: a sinner should repent, should purify himself, should fear the judgment of God. You know Psalms, an author says "Should God destroy all sinners...". They thought that the Messiah would have physically eliminated all sinners. Jesus, on the contrary, calls a sinner in his group and the first thing he does: "Let's prepare a great dinner!"

The criteria of the encounter between God and man have changed. Man feared encountering God; now he doesn't because this encounter is a source of gaiety. In front of a sinner there's no threaten or reproach made by God, but just an invitation to have dinner.

Why? Why a dinner? This is important. In the East, even today, table companions eat in a common dish; and eating in a common dish (same dish) means sharing life, celebrating life. Jesus' life is being received by this man. Also in our culture we do this; there's no feast or holiday that doesn't end by eating, which means sharing and enriching our lives.

Well, the first action that Jesus performs is calling the sinner and inviting him to have dinner.

In the Greek text there's an ambiguity; it doesn't specify if this house is the one of Levi or of Jesus, even if the English translation already tells us. It

should be "*while Jesus was having dinner at his house*". (τῆν τὴν οἰκίαν αὐτοῦ). This ambiguity is deliberate for it means that when an individual becomes one of Jesus' followers, the house belongs to both of them.

There's another particular to be noted. The Greek text says "*he was lying down having dinner*" (katakeκsqaí). In those times, during feast dinners, they ate on small couches, lying down; this especially happened during the night of Easter in order to celebrate the liberation. But who was allowed to eat while lying down?

Only the lords who had servants were allowed. When Jesus calls somebody, he doesn't leave him in a condition of subjection or submission to him, but sees him as having his same dignity. Jesus, the Lord, calls people not for maintaining a distance: "I'm the Lord and you are a follower", but invites people in order to raise them at his same level. Therefore, obedience is over, Law as a tool for relating to God is over, for from now on there's only a communication of love.

The one who really loves, doesn't create differences with the one whom he loves, but wants the other to feel at his same level.

And what happens? Those are the news that people was awaiting, there's a word of mouth advertising, the evangelist writes "*many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him*".

This is the exodus that Jesus started. He came to set people free from a religious institution that used to confine people in the sphere of sin, then claiming for itself the unique right of forgiving it.

The love of Jesus is for anyone. That's why the exodus starts, people begins to follow him. Many entered that house and were eating with him. We are very far from this mentality, we don't realize the seriousness of this situation, those were people known as sinners and misbelievers, and they lay down and eat with Jesus.

As a matter of fact there's a scandal: "*When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the 'sinners' and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?'*" (Mk 2,15).

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees, the ancient theologians, were those who observed all the regulations of the Law and believed to be welcome by God according to their observance, and try to instill suspicion in the disciples. They go to the weak and say: "Look, Jesus is not a serious spiritual master, see how he's eating with the sinners!"

There's an expression that is often used in the common language "Have you ever eaten in my dish?" Eating in the same dish indicates a great intimacy, a great familiarity. If people eat in the same dish it means that those who are unclean put their hands in the dish and the entire dish becomes unclean, and all the eaters too: this is the theology of religion, the one that scribes have learnt. They go to the disciples and ask: "How can you follow Jesus when he's unclean?" - he has become so by eating with sinners.

"On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mk 2,17)

This verse here is very important because it represents the Jesus' teaching which makes a difference between religion and faith. In religion an individual has to deserve God's love; faith only needs this love to be welcome.

Religion, in its perversion, doesn't allow the sick to go and see the doctor before they're healed, when it's useless.

This is also an approach that penetrated Christian spirituality. Those who experience difficult situations that morality, religion and society define as negative or sinful are kept distant from the Lord by saying: "You live in sins, you cannot approach the Lord", because in order to approach him they shall be clean.

Jesus tries to let them comprehend the foolishness of this argument. Who among you, when he happens to be sick and asked if he has called the doctor would answer: "No, I'll call him when I'm healed!". When he is healed there no reason to call the doctor anymore.

This ruinous teaching of religion, The Yeast of the Pharisees, as Jesus calls it, has so polluted Christian spirituality that we still meet people who avoid approaching Jesus because of their alleged impurity.

It's really because of their impurity that they need to approach him!

But in religion approaching the Lord is a reward for those who are clean. Jesus demonstrates his opposing argument: welcome me and you become clean.

Religion states that an individual has to become pure in order to be allowed to approach the Lord; with Jesus, the action of welcoming him, the Lord, makes people pure.

This is the good news that Mark is introducing. It is for all those who are suffering, all those who are experiences difficulties, for they can feel it; here comes the gossip that I was saying before. Jesus calls one person and many others come.

This category of people, the most despised, ignored by everybody, feels that God doesn't discriminate the praiseworthy from those who are not, but addresses his love to everybody. The good news is that love shall not be deserved anymore. God's love just must be welcome as a free gift made by the Father.

This completely destroys the building of religion.

We saw that there's a very positive image when Jesus, who is the visible revelation of God, meets the sinners and eats with them; he conveys life to them. That's what faith is all about. When God meets a sinner he never humiliates him, he never increases his sense of guilt, but raises him through his Fatherly love. The encounter of a sinner with God is not a humiliating one, the analysis of his offences, but the acknowledgement of the greatness of God's love.

Now let's turn the page. The evangelist writes: "*Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting*" (Mk 2,18). These are those who think they have to deserve the love of God by self-imposing a discipline or an asceticism. Asceticism (Æskhsij) is a technical expression of Christianity which indicates the attitude of securing God's love and forgiveness.

Those are things that Jesus found useless. Indeed he didn't suggest any rule or regulation to Levi, the tax collector, he only filled him with love and made him eat with him, conveying him his same life and setting him free: no rules, no laws, no conditions.

There are John's disciples and this expression here is quite strange. Why just John's disciples? John the Baptist, once he had seen Jesus, realized he was the awaited Messiah and suggested to all his disciples to follow Him. But they disagree! Jesus is not like the Messiah that they were waiting for and obstinately remain disciples of John. John, himself, will be in crisis. You all know the episode in which John is arrested. Once in jail he finds out that Jesus doesn't correspond to what he thought and announced to people. John the Baptist introduced Jesus as the man of God, the one who would have come to judge the good and weak. He used to say: "Here's the one who holds the ax and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire". Jesus says instead: "No way, around every tree that does not produce fruit I will lightly hoe and I will put some manure and wait until it will be fruitful".

Jesus didn't come to destroy, but to rise life whereas it is dead! And poor John the Baptist, who is in jail, is a bit confused and asks Jesus: "Is it you

the one we were waiting for or another one is coming?" "I've announced that you would have come for the good, but you came for the sinners. And what about the good, then?" (the good are those who force themselves to observe the Law in order to be accepted by God - Jesus says that there's a category of people whom he doesn't address at all for it is insensitive to the love of God. Those who believe they have to deserve His love will never be able to understand the greatness of His loving gift. John is skeptical, too.

These are the disciples who didn't accept Jesus as the awaited Messiah and got along with Pharisees, Jesus' enemies; therefore they are fasting.

What is this fast?

Fasting, in Israel, was prescribed only once a year, during the feast of forgiveness. There was a ceremony which provided for the High Priest to lay his hands over a goat and sent it away into the desert - the famous scapegoat.

During that feast all sins were forgiven and people used to fast. You know that there are some people - as it is said in the folk language - who are more priest than priests and want to do always more. Pharisees, who loved piety gestures, created other days of optional fasting: Mondays, to celebrate the ascent of Moses on Sinai Mountain; Thursdays to celebrate his descent.

In those two days, Mondays and Thursdays, in which good individuals, the pious and religious ones, used to fast.

Which is the meaning of 'fasting'?

Fasting is an expression of death, because the one who fasts is going to dies.

It's a voluntary fasting which is not intended as to feed someone else, but it's a religious one. That is attracting God's attention by mortifying oneself through an expression of death, fasting.

God is so careless, he has so many things to do, that cannot take care of people: when he sees a person who is in danger maybe he will care, then.

Fasting is therefore something to get God's attention, to attract His love and His forgiveness.

Fasting was an expiatory practice which was used in order to obtain God's forgiveness.

Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" (Mk 2,18)

Jesus, who was not a pious one or a religious one, did never fast and never urged the disciples to do it!

I prefer to immediately anticipate a certain objection that you will raise: "Jesus fasted in the desert!".

No. A religious fasting is one from dawn to dusk. If you go and read that episode, you'll find "*After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry*". It's not a religious fasting. It's a sort of literary tool that the evangelist uses to mean that Jesus, like Moses, climbed on Sinai and didn't eat and drink for 40 days.

According to Gospels Jesus never fasted, but mainly excluded fasting as a practice.

Please note that we are not talking about fasting in general, but we refer to fasting as a religious practice, performed in order to obtain God's love and forgiveness.

Remember the question "*How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?*"

Jesus never taught fasting. If we succeed in comprehending this verse, our relationship with God changes significantly and also changes our approach to others: **this is new wine!**

Let's hope there will be no opposition of behalf of old "wineskins".

Here 's Jesus' answer: "*How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?*" - literally translated from (of ufo[^] toà numfînoj) that I will explain later on - "*They cannot, so long as they have him with them*" (Mk 2,19)

Religion teaches that there was an abysmal distance between God and the believer: remorse and sins are weighing down on him. Religion obtains therefore its greatest success when the believer never feels his unity with God.

We are talking about the Hebraic world, but Catholicism is not too different. Before the Second Vatican Council we used to believe that individuals should be 'in a state of grace' in order to be allowed to Communion. Have you ever felt in a state of grace?

It was extremely difficult, for even if you strongly applied yourselves and observed every rule you would never feel in a state of grace. The same idea of "being in a state of grace" would make you lose it, for you committed a sin of pride.

Jesus changes everything. He says: "*Can the guests of the bridegroom fast*", literally from Greek (of ufo[^] toà numfînoj), because some translations say

"the friends of the bride" but it's not correct according to the customs of the Jews. Let's try to understand who these friends are.

The wedding, the second phase of a marriage happened as follows: the groom took the bride and they went together in another room where a canopy was prepared. They had their first sexual intercourse, and two witnesses had to assist from behind a curtain, in order to verify the virginity of the bride. This was essential. When the groom found that his bride was virgin he made the so-called "cry of the bridegroom". John says in his Gospel: "*The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice*". That meant that the wife was virgin. There was an applause and the groom used to give the sheet with the blood on it to the witnesses as a proof of her virginity. The two friends took the sheet, went into the other room and showed it to everybody and then gave it to the bride's parents, in case of any future opposition.

Why is this explanation particularly important? In order to participate to a such intimate moment, the two friends really had to be special ones. This is the relationship that God wants to have with us all, as his brethrens.

How far we are from this reality!

Even if Jesus said "*I no longer call you servants; I have called you friends*", yes but he is God! In catechism we find that Jesus is a friend, God is a friend, yes but he is always God! So, it's better to take precautions.

Remember all rites, all behaviors we put into action for God. Those are not the ones we use with friends, but towards a divinity we are afraid of.

Jesus defines his disciples, all those who welcome his message - and us, too - as "the close friends of the bridegroom". He asks "*Can the guests of the bridegroom fast?*"

The task assigned to the guests of the bridegroom was so important that they were allowed, on that day, not to observe religious rules. Which was their task? Apart from the one we have already said, they had to take happiness into the group. Marriage was the only human event where priests didn't take part. Marriage had nothing to do with religion, it was something joyful and merry.

Should priests take part in it, it would have become something gloomy.

Jesus asks: "*Can the guests of the bridegroom fast? They cannot, so long as they have him with them*"

Those had to be happy and bring joy into the group, those who were so close, could they fast? Jesus strictly excludes fasting as an ascetic or spiritual expression.

"But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast". (Mk 2,19)

Jesus says that the bridegroom is present and they should not act as if he was not. When he will be taken away they will fast.

When? The day of Jesus' death. But it won't be a religious fasting, but one due to the painful event.

When a dear one dies we don't want to eat. In some areas of our country, neighbors and friends are used to prepare some food as the relatives have no interest in it.

On that day, the day of Jesus' death, they will fast, as an expression of pain: **only that day.**

But we know that Jesus passed through death unscathed, life was stronger than the death that had been imposed to him. Jesus is alive and present in the community.

In the Christian community all the ancient religious behaviors, as deserving the love of God through sacrifices, is no longer welcome, fasting included.

Fasting is a death expression which shall not belong to a community in which the groom is present, where everyone is responsible for the happiness of others. We are all called to be close friends of the Lord, as the guests of the bridegroom and are therefore responsible for man's cheerfulness.

Should this verse really permeate our lives, Masses and gatherings would be very different!

Let me just forestall another possible objection. "But what about all saints? They made sacrifices, penitence, fasting, why did they?"

It's very important that our life be based only on Jesus' teaching. But this teaching is usually conveyed in an inaccurate, or even wrong way. Think about fasting, for example.

In Christian spirituality, before the Council, we used to fast because there was a passage of Mark's Gospel which had been translated with *"This kind of spirits can come out only by prayer and fasting"* (Mk 9,29)

It seems that Jesus suggests fasting. In the original Greek text there's no indication of fasting, only prayer.

Maybe that a copyist, a monk in the IV century, added the word 'fasting'. You see how the original text is important? If Jesus says that fasting is needed, so we all fast. But this is just an error.

Let's talk about saints. If you read saints' biographies, they used to do penance, they suffered, something more like a psychiatric manual, more similar to masochism than spirituality. Why? On the Gospel that they read

was written "if you don't repent you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven". Jesus never said something like this! He says "if you are not converted you will not enter the Kingdom of God". The wrong translation of the verb "to convert" (metanošw) with "to repent", caused this kind of misunderstanding, a spiritual tragedy for Christians, because they used to believe that pains and sufferings were from God, for the sanctification of mankind.

The more an individual made sacrifices, the more happy God was. Those of my age surely remember a catechism based on acts of mortifications: "Give up this and the Lord will be happy" and other similar aberrations.

The word penance is not present in Gospels. Where you find it, this is due to wrong translations.

There are people who had their life completely ruined because of mortifying and holding back natural drives, which they thought should be chocked down. Let's bring this commentary to an end by analyzing the sentence, that important expression that needs quite a big effort in order to be well understood:

"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. ²²And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins." (Mk 2, 21-22)

The real novelty brought by Jesus, the good news, is that God loves you apart from your behavior; God's love shall not be deserved, but welcome. This is the new wine, which represents a completely new relationship with God: nothing has to be done in order to feel appreciated by God; just welcome His love, and go towards others with Him and like Him.

This new wine - the good news of Jesus - needs commitment on behalf of all believers: completely change course by because if one puts this news into an old way of thinking about God, he will never taste the new flavor. What is ancient is religion, which takes freedom away, but maybe guarantees a sense of confidence. You can be sure: I made this and that, I'm not free, I have to ask permission for everything, but this makes me confident.

Jesus takes this confidence away, but gives you FREEDOM. For this freedom mature people are needed. What does "new wine into new wineskins" mean?

It is a warning that the evangelist gives to the Christian community, where he still sees the ancient ways of thinking, the religious ones, those that they define 'The Yeast of the Pharisees'. It's like making Jesus' teaching a simple set of rules to observe - this is the danger for Christian community.

It's a complete failure, it's the end of the teaching of Jesus! They already made it with the Law of Moses. They've codified the Law into rules and precepts to obey; it has been destroyed.

The evangelist warns about the danger that also Jesus' teaching can be turned into rules that maybe even don't pertain to people that are forced to observe them. If one suffers, it doesn't matter; rules must be obeyed.

This must be changed. Gospel's greatness is that it has always been a living text.

What does this mean? We have four different Gospels. Why are they different? Because as life of Christian communities went on, new situations arose, that Jesus didn't foretell in his teachings.

Shall we make those people suffer in order to obey Jesus' teaching or can we enrich it, enlarge it and slightly adjust it in order to meet these new requirements?

In the first four centuries Gospel was a living text, which was enriched as to meet the new life conditions of people and allowing them to feel free and to taste this new wine and this new Spirit. New wine is something that ferments, something good which requires a change of outlook.

In this Gospel Jesus urges us to give up the old behaviors of religion, the old relationship with God otherwise we won't be able to fully appreciate his novelty. A brave action is needed: let's give up the ancient wineskin, the one of religious habits, of the old relationship with God and will taste this new tasty wine.

Eucharistic Celebration
Passage from the Gospel of Matthew
(Mt 25, 1-13: The parable of the ten virgins)

Jesus said this parable to his disciples:

"At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'

Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.'

"But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

"Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!'

"But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour".

This is a very embarrassing parable that puts priests in a state of crisis as they have to find a comprehensible way to explain it. It represents a problem also to the audience whereas all characters of the parable make a really bad impression.

The bridegroom makes a bad impression for he is late, and he is very rude to the five virgins who remained without oil. He even doesn't let them in by saying "I tell you the truth, I don't know you".

The five foolish virgins make a bad impression, too, for they took the lamp without bringing oil with them; the five wise make a bad impression for they refuse to give some oil to the others. It seems that no one behaved well.

But let's try and analyze what the evangelist intends to say through those images which seem very distant to us and refer to ancient Hebraic wedding customs.

Why does Jesus provide such a kind of answer? And, firstly, why is this oil so important as to allow the entrance to this wedding with the Lord?

The expression used by the evangelist to refer to the virgins who have forgotten the oil literally is 'mad' 'crazy' (mwra...), and it is the same word - connecting this passage with the other for its better understanding is essential - that the evangelist uses in chapt. 7 to describe the 'foolish man' (mwrÒj) who has to build a house and goes and builds it next to a lake on sand (Mt 7,26 ... *like a foolish man who built his house on sand*').

Only a foolish can build such a house, without any foundations: during the first flooding, sand will be taken away and the house will collapse (Mt 7,27: *The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.*)

And Jesus said: "This foolish is the one among you who listens to my words, likes my teaching, but doesn't practice it" (Mt 7,26: ... *everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like...*").

These foolish virgins - 'virgin' (parqšnoj) means girl - represent those believers who are enthusiastic about the message of Jesus, welcome it, but don't put it into practice. These are the ones who find themselves without oil for the lamp, in due course.

Why is this oil (œlaion) so crucial?

Jesus had said: "*Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven*" (Mt 5,16)

This oil, which is essential for reaching an intimate relationship with God, is represented by the good deeds.

What are good deeds in Gospels? All those performed for others' sake. The only thing that has importance in our existence, the one who allows us to overcome death and enter the full intimacy with God, are concrete and good deeds we made for others. All the rest is useless.

What a pity when life is spent for all the rest: efforts, time and energy fruitlessly squandered for something that isn't of use.

Jesus confirms that the only thing that is fruitful - the only one, there isn't any other - it's not the time we spent praying, reciting Psalms, making business but the good deeds we performed for others.

He says to the wise virgins: "If this is met, you are clever and will enter life that overcomes death".

To others Jesus says: " I tell you the truth, I don't know you", and that's exactly what Jesus said to the disciples when they tried to assure they had

prophesized in his name (Mt 7,22-23): *Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you'. Away from me, you evildoers!'*

Jesus doesn't know people who perform miracles in his name; he only knows those who achieve the Father's will which is the complete fulfillment of God's plan, only completed through good deeds performed for others (Mt 7,21: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven".*)

Which is the message of this Gospel, still valid nowadays? The aim of a believer is something everybody can perform - there are no special categories: the good made to others. This is the fortune we earn during our existence, the one that allows us, when passing through death, to enter the indestructible life, the one we define 'eternal'.

And once entered, what shall we do?

We all know the prayer that is recited for the deceased: "the eternal rest". It seems like a sort of sentence of life imprisonment. The idea of eternally resting is something frightening.

Why does this prayer mean and why we relate it to this passage?

In the Book of Revelation, the author says: *"Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them." (Rev 14,13).*

God was thought to have created the world in six days and to have rested on the seventh. Entering God's rest doesn't mean resting forever, but being related to the creating activity of God. How comes? Through the deeds we performed during the brief time of our existence.

All the good we've made or we are making in this existence is the fortune we accrue that allows us, once in the final life, to be called to cooperate with God in creation.

Consequently we must change our relationships with our dear ones that are already dead. Where are they? What are they doing?

They go on performing their creating action together with God. They are next to us, alive and vivifying because they continue creating the world. The evangelist introduces this passage of Gospel to the Christian community as a warning, suggesting not to remain sheer listeners of Jesus' message, but become those who put it into practice. This is possible for everyone.

Practicing the message of Jesus is not something pertaining to special individuals, or saints, for this message - the oil that keeps the flame burning - means feeling responsible for others' happiness.

We all can do it. No special talents or conditions are required: just being responsible for others' happiness.

If this is achieved, should the bridegroom arrive - Jesus never uses liturgical images in order to introduce the Kingdom, he doesn't talk about a priest who celebrates in the temple, he speaks of a bridegroom, meaning the one who conveys life - there will be place for us, too.