Sermon for 32nd in Ordinary Year A

Readings: Matthew 25:1-13; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Jesus draws on everyday events and surroundings for his memorable parables. On this occasion, he uses the features of a typical Jewish wedding ceremony to make a theological point.

It may seem odd to many of us that a bridegroom should not turn up until midnight, but it was not that uncommon in Jesus’ world. There are different versions of the text – some manuscripts suggest the bridesmaids were waiting at the bride’s house for the groom to take the bridal party back to the marital home. Other versions suggest the bridesmaids were waiting at the marital home for the groom and his bride to arrive after his visit to collect her. Either way, the wait could be a long one and the arrival very late in the day. To be late signified that you were highly honoured because people stopped you in the street on the way to wish you well.

The symbolism of the wedding is familiar to us all. Jesus is the bridegroom arriving and the bridesmaids represent those who should be waiting in faith and expectation of the Messiah’s arrival. All ten virgins are equally invited and are expected to play their part. This is a parable that offends the religious and political hierarchy of Jerusalem because they who refuse to respond to Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, are clearly depicted by the foolish virgins in the parable.

It will no longer be sufficient to claim to be descended from Abraham by blood, if you are not descended from Abraham by faith, any more than it will do the foolish virgins any good by saying that they have been invited too to the wedding feast and should be allowed in. Indeed, being a descendent of Abraham by faith, Paul will later argue, is all that matters – whether you are a gentile who is welcomed in to the kingdom or an ethnic Jew who is left outside.

Paul is making a similar point in the passage we read today from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Like the foolish virgins of Jesus’ parable, Paul warns Christians not to be spiritually asleep and ignorant of the Christian eschatological hope that Christ shall return.

Rather than a Jewish wedding, Paul draws upon the customs surrounding the visit of a great dignitary or imperial potentate to a city. This would include a herald who blows a trumpet to call the populace to greet the arriving dignitary. Whereas an imperial visitor might come from Rome, heaven is imagined to be “up in the sky” in Jewish cosmology and so the arriving Jesus comes down from the clouds to meet his faithful followers.

Some have taken these details in a literal way and have built up speculative accounts of “The Rapture” and other aspects of Judgement Day. Many do not find such language appealing, but we can all take the central message to heart: Christians have a hope in resurrection through faith in Christ, so death becomes ‘falling asleep’, since those who die in the Lord live with him and shall return with him on Judgement Day. Since this is what Christians hope will happen, Paul says Christians should live as if Christ might return at any time. Our faith needs constant attention; we cannot neglect our faith in the blithe expectation we can take it up again at our leisure just in time for Judgement Day. As Jesus warns on several occasions, none of us knows the day or the hour.

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Jesus is making a monumental claim in this parable, like he does in so many others. He is making himself to be the crucial determinant as to who will inherit eternal life and who will not. He does not come along as one of the prophets urging people to be faithful to the Law of Moses or the covenant, and upon that response will people be judged. No, Jesus comes along and says that whether you inherit eternal life or not depends on your response to him.

Oil is used not just as fuel for lamps, but also for anointing. The word “Messiah” means, the anointed One. Those who have supposedly been waiting in hope of the Messiah, but have no oil or faith to anoint Jesus as Messiah are like the foolish virgins who will be locked out of the feast.

Wesley says that the oil represents love – which is the fuel for faith – which is depicted by the light of the lamps in this parable. Wesley admonishes those believers who allow their faith to die, but do not know it until it is too late and their Judgement Day is upon them.

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So what have we to learn today from this parable?

Firstly, darkness often symbolises sin and evil; the darkness is where the devil prowls seeking souls to devour, according to the traditional prayer for Compline. Being ready means having the light of the gospel shining bright to ward off the powers of darkness and to guide others safely through the darkness to the wedding feast of the Lamb. What use the “city set on a hill” or the “lampstand set in the middle of the room” if the light has gone out?

The Church has a role to play in the safeguarding of ourselves and of all those who seek the light.

Secondly, darkness can sometimes symbolise pain and death. Keeping the gospel alive gives hope to the world - even for those who do not yet believe it. For as long as there are some who do so believe, such hope is at least a possibility. No one knows when the darkness will threaten to overpower them – so even the sceptic might one day have cause to give thanks that there were some who kept the hope alive.

Lastly, the parable underscores the inescapable and awesome responsibility we all have before God. The foolish virgins could not borrow from the wise. Whilst all Christians profess the abundant grace of the gospel, and Methodists emphasise prevenient grace freely given, there is no escaping the human responsibility to respond in some measure. It is by grace through faith that we are saved. Faith remains part of that equation and all those who are intellectually capable of reaching a mature decision on the matter will be held to account for their response or otherwise to the gracious love of God as expressed in Jesus and made known in the Holy Spirit across the whole world.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

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