

**"Please God, make me good, but not just yet". Matthew 25.1-13**  
**8.11.20**

Today's parable is one of the really interesting ones. In one way it's full of questions on a very human level. What happened to the bride? Why was the bridegroom late? Why did he not recognize the young women? These are questions that would make for a pretty energetic Bible study! Lots of things can distract us from what I think is its real meaning. For instance – I can hear one of the rejected bridesmaids saying "You don't know me? How could you not know me? You invited me to the wedding!" That's puzzling.

And we hear that 10 young women went out to wait for the bridegroom and only five took extra oil. So is this parable a lesson in being prepared? I have been a boy scout all my life and our motto of course is 'be prepared'. Anyway let's look a bit more closely.

In Jesus' day, there would, indeed, be a procession in the evening, one in which the bride would be escorted from her father's house to the wedding, accompanied by young girls carrying torches to light the way. In this story though there is no mention of the bride, and even the bridegroom is unexplainably late in arriving. Were the bride or bridegroom unprepared in some way?

Have you ever been to a wedding where the bride was really late. I remember the first wedding I took at St Matthew in the City in Auckland, with choir and bell ringers all signed up. After an hour and a half waiting for the bride to turn up, choir and bell ringers were truly brassed off. And me too! Of course I got to wondering if there was real problem. Maybe the bride perhaps had changed her mind. Actually the bridal car had broken down in the days before cell phone and nobody knew how to get in touch with us at the church. She did turn up in the end to the huge relief especially of the groom! So is this a parable about being patient?

Then there is the problem of the oil. The five young women who had enough were pretty mean not to give some of their oil to the ones who had none, weren't they?. Is this a parable that teaches about sharing? Anyway, where would five young women go at midnight to find a store open that would sell them oil? Another problem!

Finally, the bridegroom arrives, and with great rejoicing, the guests go into the banquet hall, with the exception of the five who are off looking for oil. When they finally arrive, they are not admitted because their host claims not to know them. That's weird! How could he not know people

he'd invited? They were young girls, probably friends of the bride from the village. At least in this parable, unlike the one about the man who had no wedding garment, the unfortunate women were not bound hand and foot and cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!

So lots of questions as we try to work out what this parable is about. We are helped if we look at where it fits into the whole gospel of Matthew.. If we look back at Chapter 24, we'd find Jesus talking about the destruction of the temple and the coming of the end times and the second coming. . Now Matthew's audience was most likely Jews, and it was written around the year 90. A lot had happened to the Jews at that time. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. The fledgling church was growing to include gentiles as members. The persecutions of the Christians had already begun under Nero, followed by Domitian. So I reckon this story is a warning to be prepared. Christians of that time believed the second coming of Christ was imminent, so being prepared was very important.

If we look at the very end of Matthew 24 we read: "The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Today's reading begins with "At that time" – so then this parable is a continuation of the point Jesus was making in Chapter 24. At that time—when the master returns, whenever that is – you must be ready. 'Be prepared'.

But of course the end time has not come yet, has it? We're still waiting. The point of this parable is to tell us that we need to be ready, to be prepared We must live the way God wants us to live all the time, not just when we think the Second Coming may happen. Jesus often reminds his hearers that we know not the time nor the hour. We must not be like some of the early Christians who put off their baptism until they were on their deathbed so that they could be guaranteed a place in heaven – their souls being cleansed from sin by their last-minute baptism. St Augustine in his book of Confessions stated one of his most well know quotes - "Please God, make me good, but not just yet". Actually a more accurate translation is "Oh, Master, make me chaste and celibate - but not yet!" We can't play chicken with God. It's not only juvenile, it's hypocritical. And we know what Jesus says so often about hypocrites.

So actually the parable is pretty straightforward. On a soul-searching level, it's very straightforward. Jesus is reminding us that we must live our lives as true children of God. Of course, we are human and we will sin. We will have times when we don't share our oil, so to speak, whether that's because of our selfishness or our own unpreparedness. But overall, we must seriously examine our hearts and souls each day and strive to be a witness to God's love. Perhaps that could be a reason the bridegroom doesn't recognize the five foolish virgins. Would God recognize me as a child of God right now, today?

Mother Julian says "Put your mind into your heart and stand in the presence of God all day". But we don't do we? Well much as I would like to say I do, actually I don't. If I did then I would be seeking to live by another of Augustine's sayings – 'Love God and do what you like', because of course if I am truly loving God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength, everything I do would be out of love. I would be living my life as a child of God

The world today makes it very difficult to keep notice of our spiritual lives. We see entire institutions, governments, even the institutional church exhibiting often less than loving practices. The US election of course is the most obvious that comes to mind. We might wonder if the whole world has turned a blind eye to anything of God. We're certainly not treating God's gift of creation as a gift worth caring for. With all the difficulties and horrors we see happening all round us, we might even wonder where God is in all this.

That's when we have to remember this parable. Every one of us must begin every day with the resolve to live as a child of God. It's not easy. Those who do, we were reminded in the Beatitudes, often suffer for it. But it's worth it. We must be the ones who point toward God in everything we do. That's how we stay prepared. It's through our daily kindnesses, our willingness to share our oil, whatever that might look like. It's through our example of what's important in our lives. [With Christmas coming soon, do we find ourselves totally immersed in the consumer side of the holiday, or are we taking some time to pray, to find some quiet time to thank God and ask for God's strength? Are we afraid to talk about the true meaning of Advent and the coming of our Saviour among our own families and friends, because they believe Christmas is really about buying and selling? And yes, stores will be open at midnight, we'd be able to get our oil, but would we be welcome to the feast? Maybe not.]

It's up to us to live in a way so that we are always prepared. All we have to do, all we're asked to do by God is: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength; and love your neighbour as yourself.