

### **Matthew 25:1-13 Being prepared**

Last week you may remember our gospel reading was focussing on the end times and Jesus had warned his disciples of some of the things they would face in the future. As I mentioned last week, Jesus is now turning his attention on being prepared for those times ahead and for his second coming. So, what are we to make of today's gospel reading? This parable is one of the strangest that Jesus told. It's not a straight forward story like some of the other parables and some parts of the story are quite puzzling.

We realise right at the beginning of the story there's a potential problem. Ten young women go off to meet a bridegroom, five wise ones have gone off with extra oil for their lamps and five foolish ones go without any extra oil. And with that, it is easy to turn this parable into a simple lesson of being prepared, but there are too many questions which come out of what we are being told. The story is set around a wedding feast, which is presumably about to start because the young women go off to collect the bridegroom, but he's late, in fact he's so late the young women started to fall asleep. So the bridegroom's not prepared either, and there's no mention of the bride in this story at all, where was she? Was it that the bride and groom hadn't been prepared too? Meanwhile we have

five young women who have some extra oil for their lamps and they don't share it, which makes them look rather selfish, and where would the five women who needed oil find some at midnight anyway? If the bridegroom hadn't been late in the first place perhaps the five young women wouldn't have run out of oil? And what about the strange behaviour of the bridegroom? We presume he knows and has invited all of the ten young women to the wedding, after all they have the very important job of escorting him to the feast, yet when five of them turn up late after searching for oil, he tells them he doesn't know them and shuts the door in their faces.

### **Questions**

We are left with lots of questions when reading this parable, not least with a literal understanding of what it is about, we seem to be left wondering if the gates of heaven are shut for those people who are not prepared. Yet that doesn't match the pattern of Jesus' teaching throughout the gospels. In previous parables the invitation to the feast goes out to everyone. The day's pay is the same for all, those who start work early and those who start late. And everyone is considered a good and faithful servant as long as they don't bury their gifts. But then the father welcomes us home with open arms,

even though we may have squandered our inheritance and have nothing to show for it.

### **Oil**

And what about the oil in this parable, we are told the wise women bring extra oil, and the foolish ones don't. That sounds simple enough, but we are on shaky ground if we look for the easy answers, and decide that the oil represents a life of goodness, or piety, or faith, or even a life of good works beset by our understanding of the gospel. If we do, then it starts to sound as though what is important is the amount of oil we are carrying around - as though we all ought to be doing extra good deeds, or praying extra hard, or trying to live a perfect life, so that we can store up extra oil ready to burn if the Messiah decides to suddenly make an appearance at midnight.

### **Wedding**

A few years ago I did a wedding at Christ Church and the bridegroom and his family originated from Africa. I'm sure you know African culture is quite laid-back, there's no urgency, things happen when they happen. On the day of the wedding all was well, the groom had arrived in good time. The bride even arrived in good time, but we soon discovered that some of the grooms family hadn't

turned up. It was quite a cold and windy day, so I suggested that the bride should come inside and wait in the back room, there wasn't any rush to get the wedding underway and I was happy to wait for the guests to arrive. Unfortunately on the morning of this wedding a water pipe had burst on Colne Road, just below church, and they had closed a section of the road off from the corner of Providence Lane, but it didn't seem to be a problem as a diversion had been put in place.

Eventually some more guests arrived and so I went to have a word with the groom to check if everybody had arrived. He thought everybody had arrived and so we decided to start and I disappeared in the back room to get the bride ready for her big entrance. So I got the bride and bridesmaids lined up and opened the doors, but just as the organist was ready to play "here comes the bride" the bride turned to me and said, "There's a bridesmaid missing!" I have no idea if she hadn't noticed she wasn't there or if she was just too nervous to say anything. Anyway we stopped just in the nick of time, it was the grooms sister who was missing and her young daughter the bridesmaid. After a few phone calls, we eventually found the missing family members, they had taken a wrong turn and had somehow ended up at the Grouse. In the end everybody arrived and we only started about half an hour late.

It wasn't a big wedding because most of the grooms family were unable to get visa's to come over from Africa and so I'm still a bit puzzled as to why nobody had noticed this significant part of the family was missing. I certainly wouldn't have started the wedding without the young bridesmaid or the grooms sister. Can you imagine how that would have felt if I had shut the doors and proceeded without them? I would have waited for as long as I could, because how could I have ever been responsible for starting the wedding without those significant family members and the young girl in her role as bridesmaid? If that's how I feel just about one wedding, then how much more does Jesus feel about not starting the feast until he is certain that everybody has arrived?

### **Interesting**

On one level, today's parable is very interesting and it leaves us with lots of questions. What happened to the bride? Why was the bridegroom so late? Why didn't the other bridesmaids share their oil? And why didn't the bridegroom recognise the young women? On a different level the parable seems quite straight forward. Jesus is reminding us that we should be living our lives as children of God, transformed by the Holy Spirit, with our lives modelled on the likeness of Christ. Of course, we are human, we are prone to sin and there will be times when we don't share our oil, so to speak,

whether that's because of our own selfishness or because we ourselves are unprepared for what's ahead.

It's quite obvious the overall message of the parable is about being prepared because Jesus ends it by saying, "Be on your guard, then, because you do not know the day or the hour." It seems the bridesmaids are shut out because they are not prepared by bringing extra oil for their lamps. But the bridesmaids are not shut out because they don't have enough oil- after all, careful reading reveals their lamps were still burning when the bridegroom arrived. They end up being excluded because they are worried their lamps will run out of oil and so they run off in search for extra oil, and end up missing their grand entrance. And perhaps they never find some extra oil at such a late hour, so when they finally arrive the bridegroom doesn't recognise them because their lamps have finally gone out and it's too dark? The five young bridesmaids missed out on the celebration not only because they were unprepared, but because they became distracted by looking for the extra oil. They took their eye off the ball, failed to remember their task was to escort the bridegroom to the banquet, their unpreparedness led to the distraction and the distraction led them to missing the party.

## **Distracted**

The world we live in today makes it very difficult to keep our focus on our spiritual lives, it is easy to become distracted by something else, to busy ourselves with the things that demand our immediate attention. And it's easy to put aside our preparation, the time we spend knowing God through our reading of scripture and in prayer. All of that helps to keep our focus and attention on making sure we get to the banquet on time and it even helps us deal with the distractions we might meet on the way.

In this parable all Jesus is calling us to do is be ready and be prepared, the banquet is ready, the doors are open, and so don't be distracted by a lack of preparation.