

NEW YEAR AND UNKNOWN HOUR

Matthew 25: 1-13

The parable told in our reading today really follows on from another parable about being ready at the end of Chapter 24 of Matthew's gospel, but the message of this parable is quite clear and stands by itself. So please open your Bibles at page [***] so that you can follow this with me as we study it together.

At first sight, the opening words of the story are similar to some earlier parables in this gospel – look at verse 1:

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.” (Matthew 25:1 NIV)

But whereas those earlier parables told us that the kingdom of heaven “*is like*” a man who sowed seed or a king who wanted to settle accounts; here we are told that the kingdom of heaven *will be* like ten virgins who took their lamps. That's because this parable is telling us not about how things are now but how they will be at what is called the *parousia* in the Greek text. *Parousia* is a Greek word which means coming, arrival or physical presence and in this case it is referring to the second coming of Christ. So this parable is telling us about the end times. This reference to the future is reinforced by the first three words of verse 1 “At that time..” The virgins' role in meeting and escorting the bridegroom reminds us of the image of Jesus as the bridegroom and the church as the bride in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

These virgins would have been young unmarried girls, friends of either the bride or the bridegroom and were apparently supposed to escort the bridegroom in a torchlight procession to his house. Under Jewish wedding customs there would have been a set day, but not a set time when the bridegroom would arrive at the bride's home to take her to his home for the wedding feast, so those who were to welcome him had to be patient – just as we must patiently wait for the second coming of Christ. This is wonderful imagery reminding us that at the

second coming we will be escorted to our place in God's house and we wait patiently for that day.

We are then told that half of the girls are silly, whilst the other half are sensible – look at verse 2:

“Five of them were foolish and five were wise.” (Matthew 25:2 NIV)
The Greek words used here for “foolish” and “wise” are the same as those used in the parable about the house builders, one of whom built on rock and the other on sand. Although these words apparently denote practical common sense they are really referring to spiritual wisdom.

The passage then goes on to describe the difference between the foolish and the wise – look at verses 3 and 4:

“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.” (Matthew 25:3-4 NIV)

The so called “lamps” were hollow cups or saucers, with a round receptacle for the wick, which was fed with pitch or oil. On occasions like this they were fastened to a long wooden pole, and borne aloft in the procession. The jars held the oil which was used to refill the cup or saucer. A lamp without a jar of oil would rapidly become as useless as a modern flashlight without a battery. In the same way we Christians need to be regularly refilled with the oil of the spirit of Christ, otherwise we will become useless.

Let's move on to the coming of the bridegroom – see verses 5 and 6:

“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!'" (Matthew 25:5-6 NIV)

These verses give the impression that the girls thought they knew when the bridegroom would arrive, and had not reckoned on the delay. A torchlight procession would of course be after dark, but might be expected to be before the middle of the night. The parable illustrates both the fact that the time of Christ's second coming is unknown, and also that it may not be as soon as people might expect. After all in chapter 24 of Matthews gospel, Jesus told us that even he

did not know the day or the hour of this second coming. Additionally, the parable tells us of the sudden, unexpected nature of this coming because it came in the middle of the night, the time when people are at their least alert. The shout at midnight is like the voice of the archangel and the trump of God which will accompany the second coming of Christ. But the story has a really surprising element here – both the sensible and foolish girls have fallen asleep by the time the bridegroom comes. All were equally disappointed by the delay, all fell asleep, and all were equally taken by surprise by the eventual shout.

And now we see what happened to the different kinds of girls – look at verses 7-9:

“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.’” (Matthew 25:7-9 NIV)

We do not know whether the lamps had been lighted when the girls first set out, but if so they would not have stayed burning while they slept; even a well filled torch would not burn for much more than half an hour without trimming and adjustment. So the sensible girls now had to refill and light their torches, while the attempts of the silly girls to light their torches were of course futile.

The phrase “our lamps are going out” suggests that as the foolish girls lighted the wicks of their lamps they immediately went out again, having no more oil to keep them burning. The response of the sensible girls to their natural request for a share of the oil may sound selfish, actually the statement is even firmer in the Greek, but we need to remember that this is a parable about being spiritually prepared and the hard-nosed realism of the sensible girls invites us to remember that spiritual preparedness is not something that others can provide for us. Each one of us needs our own oil, each one of us needs to be spiritually prepared in our own hearts. Let us not be Christians who merely look good but lack the oil of true faith within us.

When the bridegroom comes the feast begins – look at verses 10-12: ““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.’” (Matthew 25:10-12 NIV)

The wedding banquet was the high point of a wedding and could last for a week or more – to miss that was to miss everything. Here the wedding banquet represents the blessings of the kingdom of heaven, just as the feast in the parable told at the beginning of Matthew chapter 22 did. As with that earlier feast only those who are ready can enjoy it. Again the exclusion of the foolish girls seems harsh and out of line with Jewish hospitality – although it was the custom at great feasts to close the doors when all the guests were assembled. But this has become, like so many of the other parables, a story of insiders and outsiders, of the saved and the lost, and the closing of the door symbolizes that final division at the last judgment. If Matthew this time refrains from speaking of “the darkness outside” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” - as he did in connection with the other earlier parables about feasts, - he has made the same point unmistakably clear in the pathetic picture of the silly girls futilely calling outside a closed door. Here the Greek indicates that the door was shut so as to stay shut.

In a way we can liken this parable to the story of Noah. Noah built his ark in preparation for the coming judgement on the earth. When the rains started Noah and his family got into the ark and closed the door. Those who were outside were excluded just as the foolish virgins were excluded from the wedding banquet. Similarly we shall be excluded from the kingdom of heaven if we are not prepared.

The bridegrooms dismissive words “I don’t know you” have the force of the judicial verdict at the final judgment. Let’s not be in the position where Christ says **that** to **us** as we stand before the judgement seat.

The point of the parable is simply that spiritual readiness, whatever form it takes, is not something that can be achieved by a last-minute adjustment. It depends on long-term provision, and if that has been made, the wise disciple can sleep secure in the knowledge that everything is ready – just as the wise girls slept and did not suffer for it.

The words of verse 13:

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” (Matthew 25:13 NIV)

are a general reminder of the need to remain alert for, and above all to be prepared for, the second coming of Christ. Because we don't know when he's coming. It may be tomorrow or it may be in thousands of years. But, God warns each one of us to be ready for that day, not to rely on others to prepare for us and not to play Russian Roulette with our eternal lives. The only way to be ready for that day is to be ready all the time. The foolish virgins took no precautionary steps saying I'll go to the store tomorrow, there is plenty of time and look what happened to them. Of course, we may well experience death before the time of the second coming arrives, but again we need to be ready or we shall also be excluded from the kingdom of heaven if we are not ready at that time.

As I've already said the foolishness of the virgins has a spiritual connotation. It's foolish not to listen to God, it's foolish to think our ideas are an acceptable alternative to what God says. Let's not be unprepared after God has warned us clearly of the consequences in this parable and throughout the scriptures. Let's all be sure that we are spiritually ready in our hearts. Let's all realize that we are not guaranteed tomorrow. We need to be sure we are ready today, right now. We also need to make sure we are prepared in the right way. The foolish girls were prepared to turn out with their lamps and wait, but they weren't prepared in the only way that counted – having oil to keep their lamps burning. So we need to make sure that we are prepared in what scripture tells us is the only way that counts – having the oil of saving faith, which is believing in the death and resurrection of Christ and acknowledging him as our Lord and Master. This is the

first Sunday of the New Year, so today let's make a New Year resolution that really means something – to reaffirm our faith in Christ and to live according to his instructions to us.

Let's close with a few words of prayer. Father we don't want to be shut out of your kingdom as the foolish virgins were excluded from the wedding banquet, so here and now we say to you that we want to make our hearts ready for the second coming and the last judgement. To do that we first of all reaffirm our faith in the sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of your son and accept him as our Lord and Saviour. Secondly we resolve to go out to live according to your word through the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.