

Sermon on Matthew 25 1:13 – Sunday, April 25, 2021

Good morning to everyone.

I wonder if you are one of those people who likes to be very organised, who is very structured, who likes to make lists, to have a clear plan or schedule of what is going on in your life. Or maybe you are 'it'll be alright on the night' type of person, dealing with stuff as it comes along and as you get around to it, never looking too far ahead and trusting that you can handle whatever is thrown at you on any given day. Or maybe you are like me, a bit of an in-betweenner – I like to be prepared, to plan things and not be too last minute, but sometimes also be spontaneous without being too fixated and pre-occupied about knowing what I am doing from one moment to the next. Whatever one of these personality types sounds like you, I hope that you will find looking at today's bible reading to be an interesting and valuable lesson in ensuring that our lives of faith are not simply left to chance.

So, we are continuing our sermon series on the parables of Jesus and this morning I will be talking about the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25. I must confess when I first realised 4-5 weeks ago that I would be preaching on this passage and I had a read through just to remind myself of what it was about. And at first glance, I didn't really have a clear sense of what it was trying to say. On the face of

it, we have 10 virgins, five wise and five foolish, all with lamps – some bring oil to the wedding banquet, some don't. There is a bridegroom whose timekeeping is somewhat unknown, and we know that it doesn't end too well for the foolish virgins.

So, how might we look at this passage a little more deeply and home in on what it is trying to tell us? Perhaps it might be helpful to talk about a typical Jewish wedding ceremony back in those times, 2000 years ago. We might talk about the significance of the lamps and the oil. Or maybe when you heard Jane reading the passage a bit earlier it might have raised some questions in your mind – why are there 5 wise virgins and 5 foolish virgins? Why not 7 wise virgins and 3 foolish or 9 foolish and 1 wise? Are we to read something deeper into this? Also, why did the 5 wise virgins not share some of their oil with the foolish ones? Or if the wise virgins were so very organised, why did they not remind the foolish ones to bring more oil? But I am not sure any of this really points us in the right direction, and I think that is a bit of false path to go down. So, spoiler alert – I am going straight to what I think is the point of the parable – it is about Jesus giving a warning to us all, a warning for to be aware of what is going on in the world, what he was doing and what he has done, that he was bringing in a new age where the Kingdom of God will be fully reinstated, and a warning for us to be ready and be prepared for his

return. But what does it really mean to be prepared? This is part of what I want to talk about this morning.

The first part of being prepared is to accept Jesus' invitation. We are given an initial clue to the meaning of parable in the first verse of the reading which says – 'At that time the kingdom of God will be like ten virgins who went out to meet the bridegroom'. Now I have to say that when I consider what the Kingdom of God might be like, my first thought is probably to not think about it in this way. But this verse is referring to what is being discussed in the previous chapter of Matthew (chapter 24). In verse 44 of Matthew 24, we have – 'So you must also be ready because the Son of Man will come when you do not expect him'. And there are several other verses following that one that are pretty much saying a similar thing. And this leads into the parable that we are looking at today. We are being given a truly clear comparison of what it means to be prepared and to be unprepared for Jesus' return and the consequences thereof.

Throughout the Bible, the picture of Jesus as the bridegroom and the people of God as the bride is used repeatedly. Jesus is inviting the people of Israel to a wedding banquet; He is inviting them to join Him in the Kingdom of God. He is challenging them to understand that he is the long-awaited Messiah, the rightful king and Lord of all. We are obviously greatly aware of the opposition Jesus faced from the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees, and other factions. But Jesus

wanted the people to take seriously what he was saying - that He is the Son of Man, sent by God not just liberate Israel from invaders, but to defeat sin and death and to redeem us and save us. Jesus wants us to be wise, to pay close attention, and not to be foolish enough to ignore what he is saying. Get ready and be prepared for what He is doing right now – don't wait for something else to happen, don't just hope that things will work out all right, that you will be in the right place, at the right time and everything will work out fine. This has as much relevance in our time, as it did two thousand years ago.

Now it seems clear that all 10 virgins accepted the invitation to the wedding banquet. All ten virgins were originally in the same place. They had the very important job of presenting the bride to the bridegroom at the wedding banquet. We now need to talk about a little bit more being wise and being foolish.

Wisdom does not necessarily come from intelligence. I have met many very smart people who were not wise in any way! This wisdom is not intellectual knowledge, but personal knowledge, spiritual knowledge that comes from faith and the grace of God – this is what really matters. Being wise is about looking beyond ourselves, making good choices and seeking to do God's will. And it is an important endeavour to try and be wise in this way – it is important that we know wise people, that we undertake doing wise things such as

prayer, that we engage in making wise decisions. It may be that the 5 foolish virgins were deemed to be unwise because they did not take their role seriously – they wanted to join the party, but were not willing to take responsibility, they did not take the time to be prepared – they just showed up and hoped for the best – the girls just wanna have fun! They were thinking of themselves and not focussing on the bridegroom. Their foolishness meant that they failed to understand that Jesus the Messiah had come among them, they did not recognise that the Kingdom of God was being ushered in.

At one point, we are told that all ten virgins were asleep, so it was probably expected that the bridegroom might be a long time in coming. They knew that bridegroom was not going to come immediately, and so had to be ready for whenever he arrived. That is time to get ready, before the bridegroom arrives and to be prepared in good time. Waiting for God is not doing nothing.

The five foolish virgins, while pure in a physical sense were obviously lacking in other ways – maybe thinking that just being in attendance was enough. They gave no thought to preparation or readiness of any kind. Perhaps they were expecting to be let into the banquet regardless of what they did while they were waiting.

But when the cry comes, and the bridegroom is about to arrive, it is all about who is ready, who is prepared at that precise time. The five

foolish virgins realise that they have no oil and try after the event to make things right – they ask the five wise virgins to share their oil, but they refuse. And you might think that this is rather selfish of them. And it is quite likely that the oil is a metaphor for faith. They could not give their oil to someone else, in the same way that you can't borrow someone else's faith. We are all responsible for all our own faith – we do not inherit it and you can't muscle in on someone else's relationship with God. Grace that is given to each of us by God is sufficient only for one person. And the last effort of the foolish virgins of trying to buy the oil at midnight during a wedding feast was doomed to failure.

So, the parable makes it clear that we need to be ready before the bridegroom arrives and not after he gets here. What we do with our lives is incredibly important and we are not to leave things to chance. To those who are prepared and ready, the doors to the banquet are open – and at this point, the virgins are no longer called wise and foolish, only those who were ready and 'the others'. The five wise virgins were prepared and ready and went into the wedding banquet with the bridegroom.

I find it almost numbing and heart-breakingly sad to hear those words in verse 12 when Jesus says to the five foolish virgins - I don't know you. The five who were excluded were not the enemies of the bridegroom, I would guess that they might have even thought of

themselves to be his friends. Outwardly they seem to be qualified to enter, but inwardly a lack of wisdom in the understanding of the situation and what was required of them was their downfall. We cannot really lessen the impact of what Jesus said, we cannot really creep around it. This passage is a warning – take my message seriously, be wise, don't be foolish, be ready and be prepared. We are not just to accept the invitation and subsequently not participate fully in the Kingdom – this is what Jesus wants us to do, these are his words.

Many parables in the Bible speak on several different levels and from different perspectives. They often involve normal people – workers, farmers, servants and in our parable today, wedding attendants. Most of the parables speak about the consequences of different behaviours or actions – of doing one thing or not doing another that will either result in blessedness or anguish. These parables are much more than neat little biblical stories and need to be prayerfully considered and thought through. This is all part of the preparation and readiness that I have been talking about.

Faith is about making choices. Being prepared is about accepting Jesus and obeying and trusting in Him and re-ordering our lives accordingly. Being prepared is a life's work, our whole life is a preparation. Some of us may have started the preparation later in

our lives, but as we heard in the parable of the vineyard workers last Sunday, the reward for all of us is the same!

If, for whatever reason, we feel that we are not prepared, we can ask the Lord to guide us, strengthen us and lead us to be prepared. He loves us and more than anything else wants us to be with Him at the wedding banquet. The invitation is freely given - and our own choice is whether or not we accept it and are ready and prepared to do what is necessary to participate in the banquet.

So, dare I ask myself the question – am I ready, am I prepared? You might be thinking – well, I am here at the 10 am service this morning, of course I am prepared. But in my heart, I always feel there is more to do to be ready and prepared – I have good days when I feel ready and prepared, like last Sunday when we restarted the 11:30 service and there are other days when I feel so challenged and feel very far from being prepared. This parable in one sense is very black and white – you are either wise or foolish. But often our everyday lives don't feel very black and white - there are quite a few shades of grey. But if we have absolute trust in God's love, that He is for us and with us and He will give us plenty of opportunities to join Him at the banquet and the choice will be ours.

Jesus has lovingly invited us to be with Him but does not force us to accept – and with this love comes the freedom to reject it, ignore it or go a different way. However, if we know love, are drawn to truth

and are desperate for grace – getting ready and being prepared suggests that this is something we must choose to do and not leave things to chance. God gives us grace and we accept it, respond to it. One of three mission statements of our church is ‘Knowing Jesus’ and by direct implication that ‘He knows us’ – that statement is never more clearly represented than here in this parable. We would be wise to be ready, to be prepared – ready to love, to trust, to be prepared to serve and give ourselves to God.

And I would just like to finish with a short prayer.

Lord Jesus, let us accept the invitation to the wedding banquet with joy, let us prepare and ready ourselves in trust and obedience of the Lord and by the grace of God, we will enjoy the wonders of the Kingdom in His presence. Amen.