

COMING, READY OR NOT!

Pentecost 23 Year A (upload and audio only)

Jos. 24:1-3a,14-25; Ps. 78:1-7; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Mt. 25:1-13

Gladstone 08/11/2020

When anticipating an important event in your life, the value of preparation cannot be overestimated. When you take a vacation or go on a long car trip, who doesn't make careful preparations? You can't just hop in the car and hope that everything you need will be in the car when you need it. When you are moving house, as we have done on several occasions, it's essential that careful planning and adequate preparation has been done. Which of you who are married did not agonise over many hours of planning? Weddings do not just happen, they are planned down to the last and final detail—usually by the bride to be. For the important events in your life, preparation is essential.

Winston Churchill, in writing of his involvement in the Second World War, said, "I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and this trial." (The Second World War 1948-1954, I. *The Gathering Storm*, Epigraph)

The parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, likens the kingdom of heaven to a Jewish wedding feast. When the bridegroom was ready, he would come in procession to the home of the bride and either eat the wedding feast there, or proceed back to his own home. Either way, there was no specific time that the bridegroom would come. He could come at any time, day or night and all the guests must be ready for his arrival, otherwise they would miss out. Once he had arrived, and all those who had been invited had entered the house, the door would be shut and the party would begin. There was no late entry pass. If you missed it, you missed all the wedding celebrations, which might last for up to two weeks. So, in today's parable, everything was ready—except that the bridegroom has not yet arrived.

Jesus is inviting us to a wedding feast, but it's a feast for which careful preparation is necessary—not the sort of preparation that needs a lot of work—but preparation that involves being ready for when Jesus returns to take his bride, the church, back to its final rest in the Kingdom of heaven. We have not been told when he will be coming and so we must be prepared to welcome him at any time—day or night.

This parable is not about those who are outside of the church. It is about those within the church. It's about the contrast between those who profess faith in Christ and know its power and those who profess faith in Christ but deny its power. It's a contrast between those who have been planted in good soil and have grown strong and those who have fallen on the stony ground, where no foundation has been able to be formed.

By means of this parable, Jesus declares the uncertainty of the time of his return and of the necessity of being ready for such an event. As one commentator states, "No parable surpasses this one in beauty or in a pathos which becomes tragic."

The first thing we need to note here is that...

I. NOT EVERYONE WILL BE PREPARED.

Perceptions can be deceiving. The bridesmaids all looked the same, but were not. Only half of them were ready for the arrival of the bridegroom and went in to enjoy the festivities. The other half, through their own lack of preparation, missed out entirely. The similarities between the ten bridesmaids is evident and the analogy for the church becomes clear.

All the bridesmaids have good intentions and plan to meet the bridegroom and escort him to the wedding feast. In the same way, the church eagerly looks forward to that time when Jesus Christ will return to take it to his heavenly banquet.

All the bridesmaids have the outward signs of being ready. To any passer-by, they all appeared to be fully prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom. In the same way, all of those who are active participants in the life of the church appear to fully prepared for the return of the Saviour.

All are expecting the bridegroom to come. But none of them knows when he is coming. And so, the church waits in pregnant expectation for its bridegroom, Jesus Christ. But as the Scriptures tell us, no one knows the hour or the day when he will return.

All are looking forward to taking part in the wedding feast. Indeed, the heavenly feast to which Jesus invites us is going to be a magnificent event. It will be well worth the wait. But although the ten bridesmaids resembled each other in so many ways, their differences are even more striking. Five of them were foolish and five were sensible.

The foolishness of the first group rested in the fact that they were totally unprepared to meet the bridegroom. The tradition was that the bridegroom could come at any time and they needed enough oil to see them through the night until the bridegroom came to claim his bride. Although they had taken lamps, they had taken no extra oil, just in case the bridegroom was delayed. Their foolishness, therefore, consisted in the entire absence of preparation. They were careless. They didn't look forward far enough. They were guilty of inexcusable and senseless neglect. They were thoughtless and short sighted.

So too, with many who are in the church. While outwardly, appearances may give the impression of preparedness, inwardly, there has been some serious neglect. While outwardly, people may share in the work and worship of the church, inwardly, there may be no evidence of the renewal that comes by way of the Holy Spirit.

And then the door was shut. What a warning! It tells us that it is all too possible to attend church regularly and be in Christian company and yet be a stranger to the indwelling Spirit. It's possible to have a lamp that looks good, but has no oil in it.

The second thing that this parable teaches us is that..

II. THERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CANNOT BORROW.

Midnight had come and the shouts from the procession reach the ears of those who were waiting. It was time to light the lamps and join in the procession and to welcome the bridegroom. On realising that they had forgotten to bring any oil with them, the five foolish bridesmaids sought to borrow what they needed from those who had come prepared with extra oil. But for them to have lent half their oil to the others may have meant that they too may not have enough.

There are some things you just cannot borrow—you need to possess them for yourself. It is simply not possible to rely on anyone else for them. Holiness and the subsequent transformation of one's inner life, is one of those things. It cannot be bought or sold or passed on from one person to another.

While the church is a community of faith, each person is responsible for his or her own relationship with God—it's not something that rubs off through contact with other Christians. Likewise, no true Christian can share his or her salvation with another. If you are not what you profess to be, nobody else can help you or stand in for you. The bridegroom will come and then it will be too late.

And yes...

III. IT IS POSSIBLE TO BE TOO LATE.

"Too late" are terrible words. The closed door meant the inclusion of the wise but the exclusion of the foolish. When the five foolish bridesmaids returned, with or without the purchased oil, they discovered that they had been locked out. When they knocked on the door, the bridegroom said, "Go away, I don't know you." The implication of this statement is that, because they had not been a part of the wedding party, they had obviously not been invited. In the real situation of a Jewish wedding feast, the bridegroom may have

been a little more generous, but when we understand this parable's relationship with the kingdom of heaven, the significance of being permanently locked out hits us even harder.

If you have lost your job, it's too late now to say you will try harder. When a divorce comes through, it's too late to make amends. If your maths exam starts today, it's too late now to prepare for it. And those terrible words of "too late" are never more awesome and troubling than when applied to the second coming of Christ. Jesus is saying, "Make sure you don't miss the party!" You need to be ready. You must be prepared ahead of time.

Preparation for the return of Christ means living a life, clothed with Christ—now. It'll be too late when you hear the trumpet sound of Christ's return. The invitation to the wedding feast has come. Jesus has invited us to join in the celebrations. When he comes—he who is able to look into the hearts of people—he will see the reality of our faith. Outward show will never replace inward holiness.

CONCLUSION

The parable of the Ten Bridesmaids is full of emotion. Jesus wants his listeners, including us, to feel deeply for the foolish bridesmaids, who were so unprepared, so that we might not make the same mistake. Who we are as Christians, on the outside—in our ritual, our worship or our service—is no indication of the state of the Spirit that dwells within us. There are many in the church who have never fully understood what it means to be a Christian—both the privileges and the responsibilities. Some live as though the faith of their parents or the hold they have on their tradition is enough. It is not. We need to realise that faith in Christ demands our constant vigilance.

The pivotal point of the parable is that no one knows when the bridegroom is to come. If we knew the time and date of the return of Christ, we wouldn't have a problem. We could make our preparations just in time for his coming. But in God's wisdom, the time and date have not been revealed to us. Therefore, preparation for Christ's return must involve a lifestyle of constant diligence and fellowship with God, which is the grateful response to the grace of God, given to us in Jesus Christ.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.