

Sermon for Proper 27A

The Text: Matthew 25:1-13

This sermon is based on today's Gospel reading from Matthew 25, and is provided by the LCA Commission on Worship, with thanks to the original author, and to Pastor Neil, for helping to edit it for clarity and concision.

Jewish wedding celebrations at the time Jesus first taught this parable would have been quite a sight. They would go for days, beginning on the evening that the groom, accompanied by his friends, would go in festive procession from his father's house to the home of his betrothed to bring her to his own home.

While the groom was on his way, the bridesmaids would attend to the bride. They would have lamps with them ready to light when the groom arrived. When he arrived, his bride would come out, and the maidens would light their lamps, performing various dances as they lead a festal procession to the groom's house. There they would share in feasting and joyful celebrations.

This is the imagery Jesus uses in the parable to teach us what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. The groom in Jesus' parable represents Jesus himself. The kingdom of heaven, then, is like a husband who promises to be faithful and loyal to his wife forever, and brings her to his own home, where there is much joy and celebration. Jesus himself will come to bring his people to his heavenly home to share in the feast without end.

But when Jesus arrives, not everyone will be a part of this celebration. Things in the parable don't go as the people might expect.

The bridegroom is a very long time in coming—so long, that, understandably, the maidens all get drowsy and fall asleep. It's not until midnight that the cry rings out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the maidens wake up and trim their lamps ready to light.

The bridesmaids who are foolish miss out on entering the groom's home to share in the feast, because they haven't brought oil with them so that their lamps can be lit. They are not foolish because they fall asleep - *all* of the maidens, both wise and foolish, fall asleep. But the foolish maidens are foolish because they are not prepared.

We, today, separated by time and culture, miss how bizarre their failure to do this is. For Jesus' initial audience, it would have beggared belief that these maidens who were invited to participate in such an occasion didn't take spare oil with them.

You see these primitive lamps wouldn't have stayed alight for very long before needing to be refilled. *So even if the groom was on time, they likely still wouldn't have had enough for the procession back to his home.*

Desperately, the foolish ones say 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.'

They set off trying to find some from somewhere – at *midnight* – but when they do, the bridegroom arrives, and the wise maidens who are prepared, go in with him to the wedding banquet, and the door is then shut.

Later, the others come and implore him to allow them to enter: 'Lord! Lord!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' But because they weren't with the groom when he arrived, he doesn't know them and he thinks they're gatecrashers; so he replies: 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' The door remains shut. The opportunity to enter the wedding banquet is lost for those who were unprepared.

After the parable, Jesus urges: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour" (verse 13).

We are nearing the end of the church year, and the readings in these last weeks reflect themes of the end times. Because Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead, and bring his people to his heavenly home, he calls us to be like 'wise maidens': those who are prepared for his arrival by revering and trusting him, and who have wise understanding by receiving and following his word. He warns that those who are not ready will not be permitted to enter the heavenly celebration. The door will be shut.

That begs the question—is God that uncaring and unmerciful?

In the person of Jesus, God has done everything necessary to first open the door before he closes it. It was precisely when we were not prepared; while we were sinners, that God showed his compassion and love for all people, opened wide the heavens, and sent his one and only Son into the world, who gave himself to

reconcile us to God. Romans 5:8 tells us, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Jesus who was exalted high on the Cross to draw all people to himself, has made the preparations for us to participate in the heavenly celebration. He has perfectly fulfilled the law for us, which included his own suffering and death. God has not kept this hidden from the world, but revealed through his Word how it is possible to have life with him.

Jesus' disciples were the initial audience of this parable. Jesus would soon be crucified, and they would be persecuted themselves. They are not to lose heart, despair, grow complacent, or be led astray. They must remember his teaching and stand firm in their faith, for he could be a long time in arriving to overcome evil once and for all, and restore creation to the way God intended it in the beginning.

This parable is part of Jesus' warning and encouragement to his disciples to watch and wait; to stay strong in faith and live according to his word. One's flame of faith burning brightly in the world can only burn brightly with oil in the lamp. Faith can only keep burning if it is fueled by God's word.

To us, 2000 years further on from Jesus' first teaching of this parable, it might seem that he is running late. That he is delayed. That his return is taking forever. It is easy to be dispirited on the one hand, and complacent on the other.

We might think there is plenty of time to be prepared—that Jesus' return won't be in our lifetime. We can worry about being prepared when we've finished school and don't have the pressure of fitting in, or finished a uni degree and established ourselves in a career, or paid off a HECS debt and then a mortgage, or changed careers, or finished putting kids through school, or after retirement, or when we've finished travelling...when we no longer have the health in our senior years to do the things we'd otherwise like to do.

That's the very reason Jesus tells this parable—so that we do not become casual and complacent. No one knows the day or the hour when he will return, only God. Jesus' return will be in God's time and therefore it will be the right time. Just as it was unthinkable in Jewish culture for bridesmaids to not bring oil with them for their lamps, it is unthinkable that we would not be prepared for Jesus' return by not making use of his word and means of grace.

So, keep watch—because God doesn't want you to miss out.

But while we shouldn't be complacent, neither should we live in fear, anxious over whether we are doing enough to be ready.

Being prepared comes down to fixing our eyes on Jesus and what he has done, growing in relationship with him, placing our trust in him above all else, not in our own abilities.

Being prepared is through faith in the one who has already gone to prepare a place for us; a room in our Heavenly Father's home.

He prepares us when we come to worship to confess our sins, receive God's own forgiveness in the absolution, when we gladly hear, learn, and live by his word, when we are encouraged by fellow Christians, and when we hunger for his body and blood, trusting his words that this is: "...given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins."

In this holy meal we have a foretaste of the wedding banquet. Come to meet the bridegroom—and rejoice! Amen.