



Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe



Sunday 8 November 2020

READINGS

Joshua 24: 1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78: 1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18; Matthew 25: 1-13

Parables of Wisdom & Folly

Parables are stories. And the power of a story is that, while not being real, it captures multiple truths. Sometimes not all these truths reveal themselves at once, and frequently when we return to a story, we read it differently because each time we are different.

The mystery of a parable is, in the words of Richard Rohr, not unknowable, but 'endlessly knowable'. A parable meets us where we are and invites us to step into the story, rich with possibility. We experience the parable working within the parts of ourselves that more direct, objective or factual truth can't reach. As a result, a parable has the ability to transform us – to move us into action and to inspire us to become better people.

Each time we encounter a parable, we are invited to wonder, to pull at a thread and see where it leads, and so it is with the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids.

What we do know, more than just the fact that Jesus seemed to enjoy observing and attending weddings, is that the image of a wedding banquet is used in scripture to describe the coming of the kingdom: the realm of God coming into its fullness. The arrival of the groom is likened to the arrival of Jesus the Christ, ushering in the culmination of the ages, the time when God will reign over all.

In these stories, we frequently hear the advice as a warning: be ready, stay alert, nobody knows the day or the hour. In this story, the maidens are filled with anticipation, but the groom is delayed and as night deepens, they all sleep – both the wise and the foolish – but with their lamps or torches at the ready, to be lit at a moments' notice.

When we hear these stories of the coming of the kingdom and the words, 'Be ready, no one knows the day or the hour,' we might hear them on three different levels. The first is the scenario I described – the expectation of the early church who had waited for 50 years or more after Jesus' death and began to think they had surely waited long enough; that at any moment Jesus would return for good to establish

God's reign. Little would they have imagined that in the year 2020 we would still be living in the 'end times', looking for and seeing the apocalyptic signs, and anticipating the imminent end of the ages, carrying within us both the warning and the excitement.

The second level at which I hear this story is one that reminds me of my own mortality. My days on this earth are numbered and no one can say how many they may be. When we are told to be ready, we are also reminded to live each day as if it were our last – not in fear of death but knowing that when our time on earth is up, we have the promise of eternal life. Somehow, and we don't know how, there will be a time of reckoning or judgement, and of being ushered into God's presence. Given this reality, we would choose to have our spiritual house in order.

The third interpretation of the arrival of the kingdom of heaven is also familiar to us. It's the one that says, 'Don't only think of a far-off time, but of now.' We are told, 'The kingdom of heaven is among us.' Just as the maidens bring their torches to escort the groom into the venue, so are we ushering in the kingdom by participating in it here and now. It's the always-present, and always-arriving kingdom. That is why we need to be alert, ready and filled with expectation, because the realm of God is happening among us wherever we have eyes to see.

When Jesus begins a story with the words, 'The kingdom of heaven is like this,' all three of these interpretations of the kingdom of heaven can be true simultaneously. That is the power of the parable. The vagueness of Messianic appearances is also part of the power. To quote Bruce Epperly, 'Vagueness inspires us to see every encounter as holy, an opportunity to love God by loving God's children. God is always coming to us: we don't have to wait for a God-directed end-times scenario to experience God's presence.'

So now we are invited into the story of the wise and the foolish bridesmaids, to find ourselves within it and to sense God's spirit shifting something within us. If Google were going to tell us: 'What does this parable mean?' we would be in for a surprise. Some Bible commentaries will tell you it's a typical wedding in first century Palestine, others would say the point is that it's not.

Some preachers will tell you with authority that the lamps represent our faith, and that the oil ... is Bible study. That could be a useful interpretation, but it doesn't make it absolute. Preachers will tell you with certainty that the oil represents our good works (and a list of what they should be), and others will tell you that since the bridesmaids were asleep, it certainly does not represent works. Therefore, we are left with our own wondering questions: where is the bride, why does the groom arrive so late, or just two questions that I want to explore today – what could the oil represent, and what makes the bridesmaids wise and foolish (beyond the obvious)?

The parable falls into a tradition of stories that demonstrate the contrast between the wise and the foolish, urging us to choose. If only it were that simple. We don't come with labels. Wisdom is earned through experiences, and even the wise act foolishly sometimes. The stark contrast of wise and foolish is one of the techniques of story that shifts us to grow, but either/or scenarios and all-or-nothing opposites have little to do with real life.

Let me tell you my own story. In the early 2000s which feels like light years away in terms of technology and experience, I was giving my first presentation at a national conference to a couple of hundred teachers. I was told to rely on the IT at the conference venue, so I saved the slide presentation on a usb flash drive and left my own laptop in Johannesburg as I was flying to Durban.

These are in retrospect two foolish decisions which I would never make again. But this time, by luck, my foolish decisions weren't the problem. The problem was that the IT provider for the conference was not an expert, and he had arrived with his laptop, but no charger. Does that not sound like arriving with a lamp but no oil? Unbelievably foolish, but I can't judge him considering the number of times I've taken my laptop to work while leaving the charger at home. Just another foolish bridesmaid.

My presentation was right before lunchtime, the laptop had been in use all morning and as I stood up to speak, the power died, and my presentation vanished. I was relying on the visuals to demonstrate a lot of information, so I had a choice – give up or press on. There was no oil in my lamp, so to speak, but I couldn't go anywhere to buy some. The man in charge of the laptop went home to fetch his charger, only to arrive after lunch, too late, when it was all over. But my report had to be shared and this was my only chance to do it, so, without the visual aid, I described what I had gone there to present. It was not satisfying, I felt unprofessional and inadequate but presenting nothing would have been worse.

Here's my point. What if the missing oil wasn't the main problem in Jesus' parable? What if their own absence was worse? Eleanor Stump wrote, 'What would have happened if their Lord had found them in darkness but also in humility, not trying to climb to safety on the backs of others, but just acknowledging their mistakes and hoping in the Lord? Does anyone really think that their Lord would have cast them out?'

She thinks that, 'Their folly lies in their insistence on having just what they want when they want it, no matter what the risk or the cost.' I think their folly was in how they measured their readiness. Waiting with oil and light would be better, but not waiting at all is tragic.

We are nearing the season of Advent – the time of waiting. We will experience heightened expectation and awareness of the imminence of God's presence. In that atmosphere, we prepare as we can. But we can also ask ourselves: what is it that we feel we are lacking, and is that sense of lack pulling us away from church and away from God? What might make us abandon our post and go off into the marketplace?

Sometimes when it comes to our spiritual life, we feel like the bridesmaids in the dark – underequipped, unprepared and foolish. Lots of regrets. We have been urged to be ready, but we are focused on what we lack in comparison to others – the oil in our lamp. But we don't leave. We show up. Jesus finds us in our darkness, empty handed, but watchful, faithful. Focused on him and ready to receive the grace of his presence that will fill our lamp and ignite the flame in our hearts again.