

## Waiting for the Bridegroom

Matthew 25:1-13; 8 November 2020.

Have you noticed? Have you noticed the Christmas decorations already in place in any of the malls. They've been in place in North Rocks for sometime now. It's a sign that the old Christian year is coming to a close. 2020 is on its way out—and what a year it has been: remember the fires, the heat, the hazardous air—all before Covid 19 struck. It is as if 2020 was a year spent either wearing masks or being confined to home.

2020 is on its way out! And so is the gospel in whose company we have spent the past twelve months. The Christian new year begins this year on the 29<sup>th</sup> November—that is, the first Sunday in Advent—and we will then bid farewell to the gospel of Matthew and begin our walk along the way of Christ in the company of Mark. But not quite yet.

Our reading this morning is variously described as the parable of the ten bridesmaids or the ten virgins. The way in which Matthew's gospel is constructed there are five blocks of teaching and five blocks of ministry that separate the birth of Jesus and his death. The way in which this gospel has been organized has been very carefully done. This passage to do with bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom to appear comes from the last of those five sections to do with Jesus teaching.

Now you may have guessed that the wedding practice in this gospel is not the same as we might know in our day and age. There are no grooms in newly bought dress suits; there are no brides in long flowing expensive dresses and freshly coiffeured hair, there are no cars with ribbons attached to their bonnets: there are no hen or stag parties; there are no photographers, no videos to look at later; put away the confetti—there isn't any— and there are probably no honeymoons afterwards.

A wedding back in Jesus' time was not quite like ours today—but, if you had the money, it could still be a lavish affair with much hospitality, a good banquet or two, some customs we might find awkward and there would be careful attention given to the guest list because who was invited, and who was not would say a great deal about your standing in the community.

This particular parable is not just about a wedding, though. In the Hebrew scriptures a marriage and a banquet could become symbols of something else; they could become a sign of the presence of God, and of the people's relationship to God. Consider, for a moment, the book of Hosea where Hosea's relationships with his unfaithful wives resemble Yahweh, the Lord God's relationship, his covenant with the people of Israel.

There are 96 images of the church in the New Testament: some are very familiar—you are the body of Christ, you are the people of God, you are a fellowship of the spirit, you are Jesus's friends, a light to the nations, the salt of earth, you are like yeast. There are a lot of images to pick and choose from—and it can be a very good thing for a congregation to discern which images most make sense to them and which they would wish to reflect and honour.

I wonder if the members of this congregation have ever thought of themselves as the bride of Christ: Jesus is the bridegroom. You are the bride. It is one of those 96 images and, in days gone by, this image taken from a wedding, from a marriage ceremony, was frequently owned. You, the people of Westmead, are the bride of Christ.

And so a wedding scene—like this one in the parable—where the bridesmaids are waiting for the bridegroom—can become a symbol, a sign of waiting on God, waiting on the Christ who is to come again. Seen from this perspective we might say that this parable is not really about a wedding so much at all: it is about waiting; it is about being prepared—and it needs to be read in the context of the rest of what Jesus has to say in this fifth and final body of teaching in the gospel of Matthew.

The first body of teaching was the sermon on the mount where Jesus set out to teach about what the kingdom of heaven is like. That block of teaching ended with the invitation for each of those who hear Jesus's words to do them and be like the person who builds their house on rock.

Now Jesus is making ready to take his leave of his disciples and this earthly life: he is teaching about the kingdom of God again—but this time his parables and his teachings are concerned with how do we live—how do we live for Christ's sake—while we wait for the kingdom to be fulfilled.

No one knows the hour: there may be all sorts of signs of upheavals, of disruptions—but no one knows the time—not even those who sometimes stand in the streets and proclaim that the end is nigh. The Christian faith—as we know it, as we experience it, as we live it out—exists in an in-between time: that is, a time between Christ's first coming, lived out in Galilee and ended in Jerusalem and his second coming, his return. This in-between time has sometimes been called this time of 'during', between a beginning and an ending.

It would be a mistake for us to imagine that Jesus and his first followers ever imagined that things would be straightforward—that life in the here and now would always be peaceable, settled, comfortable. That is not so. It is, of course, true that the gospel began way back at the end of last year with Jesus being named as 'Emmanuel'—that is, God with us. And the last words of this gospel have the risen Christ proclaiming 'I will be with you to the close of the age'.

What an important message that has been through the days that have made up this year: in times of isolation, in times of fear, in times of unwellness, in times of loss, in times of working from home and losing one's job, in times of our closed churches been closed, Christ has nevertheless been with us

—in acts of kindness and care, in a word here, a gesture there, in a prayer, through a Bible reading, perhaps a sermon, perhaps in a moment when you felt

the nearness of Christ as if your name was being whispered within your heart and you have known some peace in the midst of turmoil and upheaval.

His name shall be 'Emmanuel, God with us' and he will be with us 'to the close of the age'. And yet .... And yet .... In our parable this morning the bridegroom is delayed in making his return. 5 of the bridesmaids fall asleep; there is no oil for their candle; they have no light; and the bridegroom knows them not and denies them entry; in the next parable it is a landlord who is absent—and in the final parable of this gospel Christ is present in an unrecognized way in the needs of the most needy.

The purpose of the parable this morning has to do with how we wait—with how we live out the Christian life in this time of waiting, in this time of during. Through this story of bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom Jesus is advising those with ears to hear to be ready, to be prepared. You may have noticed: some of the bridesmaids were described as being foolish, others were wise.

Remember: Each of those who hears my words and does them is like the wise person who builds their house on rock; each of those who hears my words and does not do them is like the foolish person who built their house on sand.

That way of wisdom is our calling in this time of waiting: we may not know if and when a vaccine will be found; we may not know when we can dispense with masks and 2 square metre rule; we may not know what demands will be placed upon us through a changing climate; and we may be unsettled at how vulnerable the democratic process can be.

All these things are our equivalents of the disruptive signs Jesus speaks about in Matthew's gospel - but alongside that is the summons to listen to Jesus teaching, to act on it, to be ready, to be prepared, so that you may indeed find that there is oil for your candle—and, in troubling times, you can be the light of Christ to others.

Clive Pearson, 8 November, 2020.