

Pentecost 23 8th Nov 2020

Matthew 25:1-13

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When we are reading the Bible, it is useful for us to remember that the Bible is actually a collection of books in which the authors are undertaking the task of *'doing theology'*. By *'doing theology'* I mean that they are asking at least three fundamental questions:

- 'what is God like?'
- 'how does this God relate to us?'
- 'what is to be our response?'

The focus of the New Testament is the radical focussing of these questions on the person of Jesus, who is called the Christ, 'Anointed One' (Greek)...or 'The Messiah' (Hebrew)....

The New Testament is saying that the clearest possible picture we can possibly get of God is the person of Jesus. To put it in a nutshell, the question is not, 'how is Jesus like God?' The proclamation (Kerygma) is 'God is like Jesus'. As we say in the Nicene Creed, "we believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light etc etc....crucified and risen". The creator the universe is a crucified human one (Son of Man) in whose image we are made.

I wanted to give that very quick big-picture summary because it's really important to keep that big picture in mind today and for the next three weeks as we hear three parables of judgment from Matthews gospel. These three parables, all within the one chapter, take us through to Advent. If we don't keep the big picture in mind that Christianity proclaims a "*Christ-like-God*", we can end up getting lost in a terrible trail of distorted theology.

Of all the New Testament writers, Matthew's language of judgement is the most fierce and potentially unsettling. Today we hear the parable of the 10 bridesmaids and it ends, apparently with half of them (the foolish ones) being locked out of the Kingdom, and Jesus saying, terrifyingly, 'I don't know you'. So let's look at this:

The Greek word 'bridesmaid', or sometimes translated 'virgin' is Parthenos, and it is only used elsewhere in the New Testament in relation to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Mary is the archetypal symbol of trusting, open, faithfulness to God. In Matthew's gospel the allusion is indirect, where Matthew talks about the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah (7:14, 'the virgin shall conceive a bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel. In Luke's gospel, Mary is the one who says to the angel, '*let it be with me according to your word*' (Luke 1:38), and as a result of this faithfulness, the light of the nations comes into the world. The parable we hear today seems to take this image of the trust of Mary – the archetypal image of faithfulness and ramp it up 10 times.

In dream analysis it's always worth paying particular attention to images that keep recurring. Here the feminine image, reminding us of Mary, is multiplied ten times, almost yelling at us, 'pay attention to this'. This parable is being addressed to the disciples, which means it's being addressed to the church, and hence to us. The parable seems to be saying, 'the attitude *you* are to have, as you wait for Christ (the bridegroom) to come is to be one of patient faithfulness like Mary, as she waits for 9 months for the Christ to be born. We don't need to be running ourselves ragged. Stand still and wait. Pay attention!

Rather like the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:40), we sometimes get very tired and we have to have a little nap. But, like a thief in the night (Matthew 24:43), Jesus shows up.

Now *this* is the point in the story when things can start to go a bit haywire. One of the ways this parable has often been preached is that the foolishness of five of the bridesmaids lay in the fact that they had not stocked up on oil. And for some strange reason this because an obstacle for them to get into the wedding banquet, which is a symbol of the Kingdom of God. In other words, the parable gets presented in such a way that they are foolish because they did not DO something right or did not have the right kind of FAITH.

But what if we read it a different way. What if their real foolishness lay in their anxiety about the bridegroom's generosity and a misguided belief that they had to go charging off to the shops....a misguided believe that if they didn't DO the right things, that the bridegroom would lock them out. In other words, their whole imagination towards the nature of God was one of fear that somehow, if they failed to DO the right thing (like stocking up on oil) that they would be locked out of the kingdom. They had gone into a *performance mentality*, rather than relying entirely on the unconditional grace which is at the heart of Jesus's teaching in the beatitudes.....to be humble in heart...to be like little children, trusting entirely in the Abba. Had they perceived the bridegroom's generosity, they would have known that all they needed to do was to stayed put, and Jesus would have said to all ten of them, 'come on into the party, folks'.

The parable is a critique of what is traditionally called the 'Apocalyptic imagination'. The apocalyptic imagination developed in Judaism over several hundred years when they were under fairly brutal foreign occupation. In a nutshell, the Apocalyptic Imagination said, 'God will reward the Good and punish the bad'. The so called 'great and terrible day of the Lord' becomes one in which the wicked get finally destroyed.

As you soon as we have that mindset, two things happen. Firstly, God becomes inherently violent. Secondly human become frightened about performance. This is what is occurring with the five foolish bridesmaids. Because they have got into a performance mindset about God, they project their fear onto God who comes a figure who locks them out of the kingdom and says 'I never knew you'. This looks very much like classic projection onto God. The same thing sometimes happens in human relationships. A person might say to another, 'I KNOW You hate me'. In fact, the other person loves them to death, but a person's deep insecurity about their own worth gets projected onto the person in the form of turning the other into a judge.

That is most likely what is going on here. The foolish bridesmaids, possessed as they are with a performance mind set, turn Jesus into a judge.

But what the whole Jesus story is doing, is to undermine the Apocalyptic imagination. In the Jesus story, *The Great and Terrible day of the Lord is NOT God killing humans, but human killing God*. The apocalypse happens on the cross. And guess, what, Jesus returns not as a killer but as a lover and a forgiver.

The story tells us that *we lock ourselves out of the kingdom*. God will never locks us out. The author of the Book of Revelation finally makes this clear in the closing words of the Bible – where it says that the gates of the New Jerusalem with never be shut (Revelation 21:25). They remain open for all eternity waiting for stragglers to come hope.

These foolish bridesmaids indeed might have to hang around outside for bit until it finally dawns on them that the entry to the wedding banquet is not about their performance at all – and that as soon

as they knock on the door with that expectancy that they will be welcomed by the generous Christ, the door will be thrown open (Matthew 7:8).

Q/ Are there times in our lives where our anxiety about our own worthiness and loveability sabotage our relationships and what has been our experience when we rest in quiet and non anxious trust in Jesus?

Background reflections

Problem

Matthew 23:35 'so that upon you (Scribes and Pharisees) may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zachariah son of Barachiah whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar (2 Chron 24). [Jesus bookends history with human violence]

Matthew 23:38 'Jerusalem....the city that kills the prophets....see, your house is left to you, desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'. (cf Mark 11:9...entry into Jerusalem...riding on donkey)

Radical surgery – to deal with sin (violence) & death

The end is coming: Matthew 24:1-2 [Jesus speaking to disciples...] "you see all these [buildings of the temple] do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down".

This generation (era) is passing away

The Son of Man is coming

Wars; famines; earthquakes;

.....*Birth of something new (24:8)*

Heavens shaken

Heaven and earth will pass away

*Comes to culmination in the cross.....Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The **earth shook and the rocks were split**. The tombs also were opened... [this is the judgement on the old world of violence and the beginning of God's new age of peace. Death is ended. Now death (of the selfish ego) is the doorway to life in Christ.*

Trajectory of Hope

Isaiah 62:5 [restoration of Israel] 'as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you'.

Ephesians 5:27 Husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church

Revelation 21:2 I saw the holy city, a New Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, made ready like a bride adorned for her husband....he will wipe every tear from their eyes, and no longer will there be death, no longer will there be sorrow or lamentation or pain, for the first things have passed away. And the one who sat upon the throne said, 'Look, I make all things new.

Pay attention. Don't miss the moment (happened in the cross/resurrection, but now eternally present)

[remember....these parables of warning a written AFTER the death/resurrection event. These are invitations to US NOW]

Keep awake! You don't know when the Lord is coming...be ready....it will happen at an unexpected hour...like a thief in the night (24:43)

- Matthew 25:1-13 Ten Bridesmaids (virgins) – fuel up your lamps with oil.
- Matthew 25:14-30 Receiving gifts given
- Matthew 25:31-45 Look! Recognise Jesus in the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, prisoner

Don't read this parable as performative (do this and you get in; do that are you getting locked out)? Look at this as the place we are putting our attention. Jesus is talking to disciples – mainly male. Big image of the intuitive feminine! Union of masculine and feminine. Intention and surrender (patient waiting for unknown duration and attentive action). Remaining focussed rather than falling asleep.

So..... what does it mean to have lamps fuelled up with oil and be ready? What are we looking for each day when we walk out the front door. Are we caught up in the vortex of violence (which is passing away) or looking for the Son of Man – the human one in our midst?