

When I read earlier this week this parable we're thinking about today, the parable of the 10 bridesmaids, it seems slightly odd to me and raised some awkward questions. Like what's the bridegroom doing, turning up at midnight? What does the bride think about that? In fact, where is the bride in the story? And then, after arriving so late, why is the bridesmaid so hard on the foolish bridesmaids and shut the door on them? And why are the so-called wise bridesmaids so stingy? Why don't they share their oil with the foolish bridesmaids, rather than telling them to go out to find some dealers to buy it for themselves? It's midnight. What shops do they think are open at midnight selling oil? Even the local 7-11 will have closed by then.

Now some but not all of these questions can be answered by looking at the context, the culture in which Jesus spoke. Apparently, the image Jesus conjures up here wouldn't be as strange to His hearers living at that time than to us all these years later. Their weddings were very different to the way that we do weddings here. And in fact, the way we do weddings in America is different to the culture I'm used to back in England, where the wedding are different again.

In Jesus's time, the couple wouldn't go away for a honeymoon after the wedding, the wedding would be followed by a week of celebrating in the whole village, and the whole village would turn out, and they'd go from place to place as the celebrations continued. And the whole village would join in the timetable for that following week. Although I used the word timetable, I think it would be quite fluid. That's what we get from the story here. Not like the timetable of a bride I married once in London. She showed me the running order for the day of her wedding. It included seven-minute bathroom breaks at certain points in the day. She was very lovely, but slightly high control.

But in Jesus's time, it was not unusual for a banquet to start in the middle of the night because they're running so late, and the bridesmaids were expected to be ready to accompany the couple on a Torchlight Procession.

So the scene that Jesus is describing here would be familiar to the original hearers. And so would the message that Jesus was trying to get across. They would have heard, they being the original hearers, would have heard the story, as a story told against the religious leaders at the time. God had been preparing His chosen people for generations, for the coming of the Messiah. They'd been given the law and the prophets. They should have been ready for Jesus, the Messiah, who's referred several times to the bridegroom who comes, the promised one. But they weren't ready. They were unprepared to receive Him. But I don't think that that completely exhausts the meaning of the story that we've just heard. I think there are some things that we can learn from the story. There's a message in here for us.

First, it reminds us that one day there will be a great heavenly banquet at the end of time, just as Jesus promised. In a couple of weeks, we'll be celebrating Advent Sunday. And this is the theme of Advent. Advent is not about getting ready for Christmas. Advent for us is about getting ready, not for the first coming of Jesus in Bethlehem, but rather His second coming at the end of time. Advent is our annual reminder that there will be an end that Jesus will return to establish His new kingdom.

This is not the most popular or comfortable aspect of Jesus's teaching, but it can't be ignored. Jesus was pretty clear that He would be crucified, resurrected, ascended, and then one day return in glory. And today's a good day to be reminded of that. As I speak, as I say, it's Thursday, the election is still undecided. It's in the balance. Some of you at home will be hoping for one particular outcome. Others will no doubt be hoping for another. But as Christians, our hope is not to be placed on a politician or a party. Our hope is in the one who will return as the Prince of Peace. He is the grounds of hope. Have added the grounds of hope set out by St Paul in our reading from Thessalonians. And the kingdom which is to come in all of its healing and justice making, is the yardstick against which we must measure our own healing and justice-making efforts.

God's heavenly banquet in His new kingdom is our ideal, our goal, our motivation, our destination, the grounds of our hope. Without it, we have no

standard, no accountability, nothing to work towards, nothing to anticipate in God's name. The parable of the bridesmaid ends with a wedding. It ends in celebration and joy. We dare not abandon this glorious ending simply because we've got bored or grown tired of waiting.

Then we need to hear too the emphasis in this parable on being prepared as we live our lives with the end in mind, in light of that end. The bridesmaids in the story are called wise because they thought ahead and were prepared. We, too need to be prepared.

There was a medical student called Michael Cummings. And at the end of his first year of medical studies, he had an oral exam. And in this exam, he was shown various organs in jars, and he had to name them and say, what was wrong with them? The examiner held up the first jar. "It's a brain," said Michael Cummings. "No," said the examiner, "It's a pancreas." Then he held up another jar. Michael Cummings said, "Well, that's a liver." "No," said the examiner, "It's an appendix." "Mr. Cummings," said the examiner, "You seem to have no idea at all about medicine." "Well," said Michael Cummings, "I thought the exam was tomorrow." Of course, that was a lame excuse. We can't prepare like that. Some things can be left to the last minute. Others like medical studies and faith can't be.

When Mary, wife of William of Orange, was dying, her Chaplain said to her, well, he began to talk to her about the way of salvation. And she stopped him. And she said, "I have not left this matter to the last hour." She had wisely been preparing. She knew that faith takes time to develop. She had been following Jesus's advice and was storing up treasures in heaven.

Now there's one more lesson in this parable that I want to draw out. It's this. You are more valuable than the oil in your lamp. So stick around. The biggest mistake that the five foolish bridesmaids make is to leave. It's not clear that they had to leave. They choose to. Their lamps weren't completely out of oil. It says in the story that it was simply running low. They assume that their oil supply is more important to the groom than their presence at his party. So they

ditch the scene at the most crucial moments and go shopping, thus depriving themselves of a wonderful celebration and depriving the bridegroom of their companionship support and their love on his special day.

Maybe some of us recognize that feeling of how hard it is to stick around when our reserves are burning or are getting low, and we're not burning so brightly, our light is fading. And some of us feel the need to have everything perfect, to be burning bright, to have everything in order before showing up, whether that be to other people, to God, to church. After all, it's scary and vulnerable making to linger in the dark when my pitiful little lamp is flickering, when my once robust faith is evaporating, and my measly leaky flask is filled with nothing but doubt and pain and weariness. Only a bridesmaid who trusts in the groom's deep, an unconditional compassion, only a bridesmaid who knows that the groom has light and oil to spare, only a bridesmaid who understands that her presence messy and imperfect though it maybe is of intrinsic value to the groom, will find the honesty and the courage to stay.

The bridesmaids in this parable lack this comprehension and courage. So five of them scatter, and the wedding procession, I think, suffers as a result. Five fewer lights brighten the groom's path. Five fewer voices cry out at his arrival. Five fewer friends dance and sing the night away in honor of the groom and his bride. The loss is communal, extensive, and real.

So perhaps the lesson of the parable is this. Don't allow your fear or your sense of inadequacy to keep you away from the party. Be willing to show up as you are complicated, disheveled, half-lit, half-baked. The groom delights in you, not in your lamp. Your light doesn't have to dazzle. Remember, God created light. God is light. Jesus is the light of the world. You're half-empty flask of oil isn't the point, you are, so stay. Amen.