



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Advent Sunday: The suddenness of God's coming

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Matthew 25:1–13

1 "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish and five were wise. 3 The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. 4 The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. 5 The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. 6 "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' 7 "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 9 " '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.' 10 "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. 11 "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' 12 "But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I don't know you.' 13 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

As we begin the new Christian year, we pick up the great theme of Advent. I have chosen to refer to Matthew's Gospel because, from the very beginning, the Christian communities relied heavily upon this gospel to give insight into the teaching of Jesus Christ.

The word 'Advent' literally means 'to come to' and it is a special season when we celebrate the bold assertion that the God and Lord of the Universe has come to us in human form in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth. Many of the Christmas carols will speak of Emmanuel, God with us, which declares this theme.

It is appropriate this Sunday to celebrate that God has come to the world in the Person of Jesus Christ in *the past tense*, that he comes to us in our contemporary spiritual reality in *the present tense*, and we anticipate the ultimate consummation of the ages which Jesus Christ will bring about in *the future tense*. These three tenses underscore the Advent message.

Advent is not only a great season of the Christian year, but it has a distinct mood about it which encompasses excitement, anticipation and joyful preparation. However, there is also a prominent penitential emphasis in Advent. This should not make the whole period a sombre affair, nor throw a wet blanket on everything, but essentially it ought to develop the significant themes of hope and salvation.

In our commercial world, because we are so desperate to stress the importance of Christmas, it would be easy to pass this season by and fail to grasp all it has to say to us.

The parable of the ten virgins or bridesmaids is an appropriate passage to consider.

The story describes a wedding. The bride had ten bridesmaids (just think of the cost of the dresses!) and they set out from her house to welcome the bridegroom and his friends.

It was evening and they all took little lamps containing oil. In preparation, five of them had taken extra oil.

Many writers have drawn attention to the fact that 'lamps' is probably not the best translation and they may well have been 'torches'. In John 18, we read that Judas was guiding a detachment of soldiers and, as they were searching for Jesus, they were "carrying torches". If the bridesmaids were indeed using torches, the carrying of extra oil would make good sense – for the torch would be dipped into containers, providing you had them with you, that is!

The bridesmaids waited on the side of the road for a long time and eventually they all fell asleep. It was about midnight when they were awoken when someone cried out as the lights of the bridegroom and his friends were seen in the distance. The bridesmaids began to get their lamps ready. They had to rub off the burnt part of the wick and put in fresh oil and light them again.

But the five girls who had not brought extra oil with them couldn't refill their lamps or recharge their torches and asked if they could borrow oil from the others. The wise bridesmaids knew that if they gave some of their own oil away they would not have enough themselves. They encouraged those seeking oil to purchase some nearby. Therefore, the five who had not brought sufficient with them, went off to buy extra oil.

While they were away, the bridegroom arrived and so the five who were prepared went off to the bride's house for the celebrations. Later the other five reached the house and found the door shut. They knocked loudly and the door was opened by the bridegroom himself. He didn't know who they were and told them to go away.

We remind ourselves that this is a parable and not an account of an event – and it is the message that matters, not a detailed explanation of every aspect.

Our text gives us insight into why Jesus told this parable:

"Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour." (Matthew 25:13)

You can look at this parable in many ways, but essentially Jesus is warning that in this life we have to be prepared. It is a parable of the kingdom of God, which draws attention to a matter of deep spiritual urgency by using an everyday event.

In the first century Middle East, as indeed for many today, a wedding was not limited to a two-hour event; it was of major social and family significance. It had all the marks of weddings in our western culture – food, fun, laughter, dancing and gift-giving – but it would continue for a very long time. To underscore this, you only have to consider the first sign found at the beginning of John's gospel, when Jesus turns water into wine at the request of his mother.

A wedding was a celebration that continued for many days and was able to liberate people to enjoy the event in a quite unique way. For example, a bride and groom were excused major religious duties and even a rabbi could forsake his study of the law to attend such celebrations.

There is a popular Jewish saying that runs – "Everyone from six to sixty will follow the marriage drum."

When exploring the theme of Advent, Christians can be found at either end of a spectrum. Some want to ignore it and move on to Christmas – and others want to examine all the intricate details of what the coming of Jesus means, to the point of even developing an historical continuum.

Either perspective can lead us away from the real meaning of Advent and what Jesus has to say to us today. Let me look at the parable from the vantage point of the young women who were the bridesmaids – and then seek to ask what we might gain from such consideration.

BE PREPARED, WHATEVER COMES

Some parables immediately resonate with our own experience, while others are more challenging. We don't easily relate preparedness to weddings. You may ask why this is the case. Naturally, it is because weddings usually have to be planned so far in advance.

When I was a minister of a church which was set in beautiful grounds, couples would book their weddings at least two years ahead. Even if it was traditional for the bride to be late, it would only be a matter of ten minutes or so.

In first century Israel/Palestine, a wedding celebration would take place over a few days, but it could last up to two weeks. The uncertainty was part of the excitement. The bridegroom would often surprise the bridal party and seek to catch them napping. However, to ensure this didn't happen in too serious a way, someone would go through the streets calling, "Behold, the bridegroom is coming!" In this parable, the cry went out at midnight.

In his splendid *A Guide to the Parables*, John Hargreaves suggested that we understand the original situation by considering what Jesus was saying in terms of both the religious leaders of the day and his disciples.

Jesus may have been pointing to the fact that the religious leaders had not done what God had chosen them to do and that a time of disaster was getting nearer; perhaps a reminder that it was never too late to change their ways.

It would remind the disciples that he had come into the world to announce God's kingdom in a new way. Decisions needed to be made by the disciples and all who followed Jesus. His call for them to be ready would soon make sense, as these passages at the end of Matthew are precursors to the arrest of Jesus – and the cross itself.

Hargreaves suggests that the principal message is "Be ready. Be ready for each situation in which you will be judged by God. Wise people get ready for things that are coming." Jesus was urging his listeners to get ready for all events.

Charles Wesley wrote over six thousand published hymns. His last hymn was written in his final hours. We are told he called his wife to his side and dictated:

*In age and feebleness extreme,
Who shall a helpless world redeem?
Jesus, my only hope thou art,
Strength of my failing flesh and heart.
If I could have one smile from thee,
Then slip into eternity.*

Mrs Wesley reported that he died shortly afterwards with a smile upon his face. His torch was certainly well oiled.

WE MUST SEIZE THE OPPORTUNITIES TO SHOP FOR OIL

This parable can be applied to many of life's crises:

- Before we face major surgery
- In the midst of difficult family relationships
- In the setting of conflict in the workplace

We cannot leave things to the last minute. A family asked their minister to talk to their daughter; the worst kind of task for a minister. They felt she was making the wrong decision.

After half an hour of frank conversation, the minister tried to identify the issues involved. She still chose her way and, as the mother said goodbye to the minister, she said quietly, "We had hoped you would be able to turn our daughter to the right direction." As he left, he regretted not having the courage to say, "I'm not able to do in thirty minutes what you neglected to do in thirty years!"

In the Bible, the use of the terms 'wise' and 'foolish' have clear moral content. This is not a matter of intellectual or scholastic knowledge; it is about the issues of right values and productive living.

Wisdom means living with a long view. About fifteen years ago, I preached at a Wednesday evening service in Charlotte in North Carolina. This was a new church that had only been up and running for five years. They had a large congregation, close to a thousand on Sunday, but on Wednesday evening there was an innovative service for young people called "Rush Hour" and I was asked if I would speak about "making choices".

It became clear to me, as I interacted with the young people, that part of the challenge today lies in the fact that we have lost a sense of 'the bigger picture'.

- It does matter what we do to each other ... implications!
- We do need a sense of eternal values ... this is God's world!
- Judgement is an aspect of life that we need to take seriously ... God's value of the world calls for accountability.

All of the bridesmaids wanted to go to the wedding, but some of them had neglected to make the necessary preparations. The error reminds us of other aspects of Jesus' teaching, which focused upon being ready for whatever lies before us.

This is something we should not miss. The great sin – which means they missed the party – is not badness or immorality, but foolishness. It is evident today:

- Many live as though urgency is not required
- Many live as though problems will either go away or solve themselves
- Many live with spiritual 'short-sightedness'

I had a colleague who came from Rwanda and I have always had deep respect for Christians from that country. People saw Yona Kanamuzeyi captured by enemies in 1964 and he was told he was going to die. His response was, "You kill me because I'm a Christian. Well, I am ready to die as a Christian."

Mary of Orange became Queen of England in 1687. When she was told by her chaplain she was about to die, he asked her, "Shall I come and say prayers with you?" She answered, "My friend, I did not leave this matter till this hour."

Some Christians revel in thinking about 'the end times' and the mention of 'judgement' is a cause of great excitement. In this second point, I leave you with three basic principles which I believe to be very important:

- We will have to give an answer for the truth or lack of it in our lives.
- It is better to live prepared than to expect a change later.
- The kingdom of God affects all our perceptions of life, and this must become the controlling feature and all-consuming heart of our faith.

What is true for individuals is also true for peoples together. A nation cannot face a great crisis unless it is ready.

WE MUST LIVE FOR TOMORROW – AND FOR TODAY

It may be that the ill-equipped bridesmaids are a happy-go-lucky quintet, absorbed in the excitement of coming to the wedding and yet have no thought about vital practical matters:

- It is an important moment in our lives when we discover the power of the word "tomorrow".
- This can lead us into the sin of procrastination.
- The rich fool can store up much for tomorrow, but what is required is what we have today.

Today is the best way of looking out for the longer-term! The appropriateness of this parable cannot be avoided, especially in a context which encourages instant gratification. Storing up oil for the future doesn't really fit with the current trend.

In *Guilt and Grace*, the great Christian psychologist, Dr Paul Tournier, wrote about our sins of omission:

"As long as we are young we can deceive ourselves; what we do makes up for what we do not do; what we dream and hope makes up for what is lacking in reality. We still discount for the future a revenge on the past and the present. The more we advance in years, the more these mirages vanish. We have to confess to ourselves that we deceived ourselves by affecting to believe in realisations which will never come. On the threshold of maturity, then of old age, terrible crises occur which are the sources of illness as much psychological as physical."

The Parable of the Talents follows today's passage, and its theme explores our willingness to take risks and then be accountable. Fred Craddock concluded, "The major themes of the Christian faith – caring, giving, witnessing, trusting, loving, hoping – cannot be understood or lived without risk." Between the risks of life and the certainty of God's ultimate faithfulness lies a place where we must live out our discipleship.

One of the great dangers of the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ is perpetrated by those we might call 'prophesy mongers'. You will know these people; they have charts and graphs and every political event of the past fifty years neatly fits into a pattern. But Jesus said that no-one, not even himself, knew the day or the hour of his coming, only the Father.

There is, however, another distortion that is equally dangerous – those people who seek to what the Bible has to say about the end of time. They diminish it out of embarrassment. Some fundamentalists get over-absorbed in the Second Coming and take away its mystery, whilst others rationalise, explain it away and rob it of its meaning.

Recently, we have thought of the 100 years since the beginning of World War I. In the intervening years, we have seen the horrors of war in many countries, the manifestation of terrorism and our inability to unite for peace. All the while, standards of life between rich and poor are widening. We cannot sort this by ourselves, and Advent alerts us to the message of hope.

There is no better conclusion to this parable than to be aware that we must *“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”* (v.13)