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The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

25 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids^[a] took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.^[b] 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7 Then all those bridesmaids^[c] got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9 But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids^[d] came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ 12 But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.^[e]

We have all waited for many things this year, we've waited for government announcements, waited for face to face learning to return to schools, waited for churches to reopen, waited for covid test results, waited to be able to return to work, waited for that parcel to arrive in the post and waited to be physically with those we love so dearly once again. Waiting can be frustrating, very frustrating, especially when no one knows and nobody can tell you how long the wait will be.

Christians also wait, and have been waiting for over 2000 years, for something very special. We wait for the second coming of Christ. For Jesus to return and for the kingdom of heaven to be fully established throughout the earth. A new Jerusalem as described in the book of Revelation, where every tear will be washed away and there will be no more suffering or pain.

I was reminded of how long Christians have been waiting for the second coming of Christ just a few weeks ago when a friend handed me a small precious book that had been passed down through her family line. The inscription in the cover of this copy of the New Testament reads ‘To Eva, 31st May, 1899, with love R. M. D’. I love to hold old prayer books and bibles such as this, it makes me feel a deep sense of connection to not only the global church but also to the rich and deep history of faith, a deep communion with my brothers and sisters in Christ who have gone before in generations past. Brothers and sisters who have worshipped and loved God, struggled with sin, prayed for the salvation of those they love, struggled (like we still do) with the hard questions of life, struggled in their humanity to witness their faith to others. Brothers and sisters who have longed and prayed for the kingdom of heaven to be made manifest in their communities and their homes. Longed for and waited, like those who have gone before them, for Jesus the Bridegroom to return in glory. We were all reminded of this great number of people last Sunday as we celebrated All Saints Day together.

Does our passion for Jesus and hunger for revival still burn hot when we are waiting a long time? Does that passion for Jesus still burn hot in forced isolation, when all that was once familiar is taken away? When we are left to wait without knowing when the end to that waiting will come. When it feels like things are getting darker, when it feels like the world is forgetting about Jesus, when it feels like prayers are not being received. Does your passion for Jesus still burn hot through times like these? Or do we get frustrated, inattentive, apathetic, distracted or worse give up and not even try?

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus uses another parable to teach something about the kingdom of heaven. 'The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids' is in the middle of a series of 3 parables, each building on the last. All are focused on the theme of Parousia, and the need to have made appropriate provision so as not to be caught unprepared.

Parousia is an ancient Greek word meaning presence, arrival, coming to a place or an official visit. It is used to describe the second coming of Christ. The origins of the word suggest that the second coming is not just an event happening at a particular time in a particular place but rather a series of arrivals or revelations, all stages of a continuing process.

Whether the arrival is in one moment or a series of moments the message is the same in today's Gospel reading 'be ready and be prepared in the waiting'

Throughout history there have been extraordinary periods of revival, where the kingdom of heaven has broken out in places in very powerful ways. The great Reformation of the 16th Century, Azusa Street in the early 1900's and the more recent Toronto blessing in 1994. These are just to name a few, there are many more.

Interestingly some theologians have observed the intervals between the major revivals in history becoming increasingly shorter. If you graph this on a sine wave, you can graph ebbs and flow of Christianity throughout history. This is helpful for visual people like me. From this pattern one can imagine a time where these ebbs and flows meet in one place and the revelation of the kingdom of heaven will reach a critical mass and the Bridegroom will be united with his Bride in a great celebration. No spaces between revivals, just revival. And at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the Glory of God (Philippians 2:10).

Having this perspective gives enormous hope and excitement for the future, we are just another part of something so much bigger than we can imagine, standing on the shoulders of giants as they say, our prayers joined to others all around the world and all throughout history. Our prayer joined to Eva's prayers over 120 years ago.

Following in the footsteps of John Wimber, Derek Morphew, in his book 'Breakthrough: discovering the kingdom' describes the momentum of the Kingdom of God not as the tide going out but rather a jet plane that is gearing up for launch.

Are we prepared for the jet plane to take off?

The Parable of the 10 Bridesmaids describes 2 distinct groups of people, the wise and the foolish. There is only one thing different between the two groups. Verses 3 and 4

³ When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴ but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

To come with lamps with no oil suggests that either the foolish bridesmaids expected the imminent arrival of the bridegroom or it simply highlights their lack of readiness to wait. The expectation was that the bridegroom should arrive before oil was required for the lamps. In other words the bridegroom should arrive in their timeframe, in their circumstances, on their watch so to speak.

The provision of flasks of oil (note the plural) suggests that the wise were prepared to stay the course, to wait a short time or a long time, as long as it took, it showed resilience and patience. The wise left room for the bridegroom to come when it was the right time, the Lord's time, or kairos time, and didn't pressurise or put expectations on the bridegroom, who is Christ, to come within their timeframe.

To step outside our self-preoccupation and self-focus on our tiny little lives and see the bigger picture is humbling. We are but a small part of a full revelation of Christ over hundred, even thousands of years. To be convinced and self-deluded that we know when Christ will return is a kind of madness. And it is this madness and arrogance that has led to delusions of grandeur, exclusion, bloodshed, division and death throughout radical expressions of religion in the past.

God is God, we are not. Matthew 24: verse 36 Jesus says "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father". God is God and we are not.

Some biblical commentators suggest that the oil in this parable represents the Holy Spirit. The kind of oil that lights up the darkness and illuminates the way. A person's individual decision to consistently stay attentive to living a holy and fruitful life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is not sharable. Each person must choose to do this for themselves. No one can experience the kingdom of heaven on another's coattails 'The bridegroom came and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet and the door was shut' (Verse 10).

When the bridegroom arrived unexpectedly and the foolish bridesmaids were caught short, they asked the wise bridesmaids to give them some of their oil (verse 8). The wise replied (and I paraphrase) "No, go and get your own" (verse 9).

Initially this may sound quite harsh. However, this lack of sharing was not selfishness or unkindness, but rather explaining that there is a choice to make. That we must choose to be prepared, responsible, diligent, patient, wise and choose to make sure we have oil for our lamp for the whole wait, for each day.

In choosing the way of the wise bridesmaid we will be ready for the second coming of Christ. The bridegroom's unannounced arrival will not be a disaster or a moment filled with regrets. Instead it will be a time of praise for a life well lived and opportunities well taken. A true celebration as it was intended to be.

The parable highlights the wisdom in living a life of constant readiness compared with the folly of living however we want, waiting for a "warning sign" to prompt us to "turn over a new leaf" at the last minute before Christ's return. Jesus desires a true and authentic

relationship with us all the time, not a conditional relationship or a diminished one that neatly fits into our timeframes or human circumstances.

It is worth commenting here about grace. This is not a parable about salvation through works, doing the right thing, ticking the right boxes or in this case remembering the oil flasks.

We are all saved by grace though faith alone, grace is a free and underserving gift from God. With this gift we are freed from the burden of works-based salvation and we are free to live out our Christian faith in the world from a place of love and not from a place of fear. We get to choose to act in ways that glorify God and advance the kingdom of heaven not because we have to, but because we choose to and because we know in our heart that this is the right thing to do. To worship God.

The old testament reading from the book of Joshua highlights that we all have a choice. Standing in front of all the tribes of Israel, the elders, leaders, judges and officials, Joshua reminds them of their history and the great and mighty things the Lord has done for them. Joshua challenges them to choose who to worship. While he allows their free will choice he declares “But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24, verse 15). It is a conscious decision to remember the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord each day. The final verse of the parable of the 10 bridesmaids, verse 13, implores us to “keep awake”. It is not possible to stay physically awake all the time, we are all subject to the human condition, both the wise and foolish bridesmaids fell asleep, we see that back in verse 5. The sentiment is to stay spiritually awake, consistently ready, focused on the big picture, joining our prayers with the whole body of Christ throughout the ages as we press forward and move into a new kingdom of heaven reality.

Like Eva, we may never see the fulfilment of the Second coming in our physical lifetime. We do however have the opportunity to teach our children about the most important waiting they will ever experience and endure.

God commands us, as He did our forefathers to teach our children about His goodness. So that the next generation would know His praise worthy deeds and the wonders He has done, Psalm 78 v. 4.

The wait for earthly things will come and go, the covid crisis has come and it will go. Waiting for the second coming of Christ is different, it is an unfolding story over thousands of years and across many generations. The hope, the knowledge and the love of God, and the passion to see the kingdom of heaven become a reality has been passed from family to family. The relay baton now rests in our hands, in our generation.

We have a choice what we do with it, we have a choice to live out each day, living wholesome Christians lives that win the respect of others, so much so that they too choose to be like the wise bridesmaids, waiting in readiness, one soul closer to the day when the fullness of the Kingdom of heaven is revealed.