

Staying Awake!
Matthew 25:1-13
November 8, 2020

There's a wedding in the village. Everyone is excited. The entire village is part of the celebration. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like ten girls who took their torches and went out to meet the bridegroom. Their role included escorting the bridegroom in a torchlight procession to his house. The sequel to the procession is the wedding feast in the bridegroom's house, the highpoint of the celebration. Five of them were silly and five were sensible (here the Greek is *μωραὶ* or morons) The silly ones took their torches but didn't take any oil with them; while the sensible ones took oil in jars along with their torches...the girls all nodded off and were soon fast asleep.

For some unknown reason the groom is late. They are not really prepared for the long wait. But in fact it becomes such a prolonged wait that they all fall asleep. All their lamps by this time are flickering and going out. Wouldn't you know it, just then a voice pierces the eerie silence around midnight, 'the bridegroom is coming, come out and meet him!' Rubbing their sleepy eyes, the girls get up and immediately trim their lamps and get them lit again. But unfortunately, the five silly girls, are out of luck. 'Give us some of your oil,' they plead with the five wise girls, but to no avail. 'Go and get some from the shops,' seems unhelpful since no shops are likely to be open at that time of night. But off they run in desperation. In the meanwhile, the bridegroom arrives and the five wise virgins light his way to the celebration. The door is firmly shut behind them and the joyful celebration begins. Some time later the five silly girls bang on the door, 'Lord, Lord, open to us.' But the word came through the closed door, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'

Waiting for something promised is not one of our strengths. In fact, our patience is usually rather thin waiting around for anything or anyone. Waiting can be difficult! **So, what you waiting for?** What event are you looking forward to? And what kind of waiting do we find not only difficult, but anxiety-provoking? It can be an anxious waiting living in the "in-between time". And this parable reminds us that we are not alone in our waiting.

I went down Hiroshima on the bullet train from Tokyo while visiting my son. I checked into the hotel and from my window could see the Peace Park stretching out before me. I wandered down in the late afternoon sun and strolled around the park, taking pictures and reflecting on the horrendous nightmare into which the world stepped that morning in 1945. I took several pictures of the skeleton that remained of the Industry Promotion Hall building. It was one of the few buildings to survive within two kilometers of the epicenter of the blast. Over seventy thousand people died within a matter of days and over double that from radiation over the next few years. Walking around the Peace Memorial Museum was a sobering experience. The exhibits told the dark tale of destruction and suffering that the nuclear night had brought to Hiroshima. And yet the Peace Park is a reminder for all of us that we must wait in hope and continue to work for peace in our world. Yet the delay is discouraging to many of us.

Matthew's parable is really a warning and an encouragement to the Christian community in a post-temple destruction world (70AD) to keep the faith. He seeks to remind them not be surprised by the delay in Christ's return, even though it has already been delayed beyond what first generation believers anticipated. Considering that the Thessalonians to whom Paul was writing around 51 AD or so are already anxious that they have missed out on Jesus' return, we can imagine that it's quite a bit harder to inspire Matthew's community to vigilance thirty years later. It's even more difficult for us!

What is Matthew telling us in this story? Certainly by the time he wrote this Gospel many of the original believers had died. At least fifty years have passed since the beginning of the church following the resurrection of Jesus. Many in the church are finding it difficult to hang on to their faith, especially since there had been the idea that Jesus' return was imminent. hope, both for those who have already died and for those still alive. Matthew inserts this story of the bridesmaids in order to counter such doubt among the readers.

If there were scoffers then, my goodness, what of that hope now? Two thousand years have passed since Jesus disappeared from view and we continue to read that he is coming again. The delay has now become almost incomprehensible.

If one of the central themes of this story of the bridesmaids is to be ready for the sudden appearance of the Lord, there are other troubling themes. What is it that makes the five wise girls so much more prepared than the foolish? They brought a reserve of oil. What, we might ask, does the oil represent.

The most likely interpretation would take the oil to be simply the endurance of a faithful response to God's call in Jesus Christ. Jesus says elsewhere that "it will be those who endure who will be saved." The whole point of the story is to enforce the need to be ready for his coming. The foolish girls in the story represent all the empty confidence of the world's wisdom. The wise girls represent the wisdom of faith that booked in for the long haul. Endurance requires that we focus on the growth of our discipleship.

One last thing this story tells us. The door is shut. You can't come away from the New Testament, even from the stories of Jesus, without confronting the reality of judgment. The foolish girls don't get into the party. They were not prepared for the delay. Putting Jesus in the back row of the theatre of our lives soon results in him being excluded entirely from the theatre. If we do this the solemn warning is 'I do not know you'. Faith in the New Testament is defined by a relationship between us and our Lord. So, let the final words of Jesus serve as our exit from this reflection: *Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.*

You can see this question of Christ's coming back raised by the Christians in Thessalonica. Paul had suggested that Jesus would return very soon. But in the meanwhile, Uncle Bill and Aunt Jane, cousin John and sister Janice, as well as mum and dad, have died. What about them? Paul has to remind them that we don't grieve as others who have no hope. Why not? Here Paul launches into the mysterious, apocalyptic language that Jesus' used to describe the events leading up to the end of the world.

Each of the gospels devotes a chapter to the Parousia (Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21). Jesus' return will be announced by the angel's trumpet, as he descends to the earth. And at that moment the dead will rise up from their graves and those still alive will join them in the processional heavenward. So, Paul concludes, don't be anxious

about Bill, Jane, Janice, mum or dad, or any of your relatives and friends. They too are with the Lord, for to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, as Paul says elsewhere.

Back to the ten virgins! These happy young women in their best dresses are beside themselves with joy and happiness. You can hear their giggles and songs from down the street. The prospect of being invited to this one of a kind party makes them dizzy with excitement. But five of them are called foolish. How so? Could it be that they represent the wisdom of the world? You have probably heard the common refrain from those who don't believe in this Christian way of looking at life; rather they say: ***I believe what I can see.*** The wise, I suggest, represent the wisdom of faith. They are women who have believed this strange story of the Bible that God has come in our skin, died our death, been raised from the dead and is coming again to establish his Kingdom.

The bridegroom has been delayed. The wedding party has become a slumber party. They are crashed out on the couches and their lamps are growing dim. Now who looks pretty smart dragging the extra oil containers along to the party? At midnight a shout arouses them to the reality that the bridegroom is arriving. But the foolish have no oil left and can't find their way into the reception area. They simply haven't come prepared. The request to share in the extra oil of the wise virgins is turned down. They will have to go and buy some oil at the local box store which is open twenty-four hours. While they are off shopping the bridegroom arrives and they return to a closed door. The door was shut is an emphatic ending to the story.

Notice that all were invited, those described as wise as well as those described as foolish. Judgment is pronounced on those who have never responded to his invitation. They didn't come to the party with faith. The door to the heavenly party is closed because there is no relationship between the foolish and the bridegroom. Jesus says: *Truly I tell you; I don't know you.* To the church Jesus says: *Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.*

Amen