

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

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Get ready for the Kingdom - Joss Bray

Introduction

We have been looking at the parables Jesus told about the kingdom of God.

So here is the last one - the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 25. It's all about being ready for Jesus when he returns.

MT 25:1 "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. "At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' "Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' " '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.' "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. "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Jesus was coming to the end of his earthly ministry - and it was probably the week before his crucifixion. It feels like there was an increasingly urgent drive to tell the disciples and the world what they needed to know.

In fact, the whole purpose of Jesus's teaching and parables was to teach us all what we need to know. We shouldn't be picking and choosing what to read or believe - we need it all! He wouldn't have said what he did if we didn't need to hear it.

Sometimes, certain words have particular resonance and different stages of our lives. God speaks to us the things we need to hear - when we need to hear them. And of course He speaks through the bible, through other people, through circumstances or directly by the Holy Spirit in our inner selves, through prophecy, through

creation - and in many other ways. In fact, God is communicating with us all the time. The thing is to become more aware of this and that God is here - the Kingdom of God is near - it is in us - as we have talked about. Where God rules - there is the kingdom.

Going back to chapter 24

Chapter 25 follows 24 - oddly enough. It is part of the same teaching that Jesus was giving to his disciples on the Mount of Olives. He was telling them about the signs of the end of the age - the time just before He would come back in glory - although they didn't really understand it at the time. That will be the time when Jesus will come back as the triumphant king and the Kingdom would come fully in all its power, justice, awesomeness and when there would be a new heaven and a new earth and a heavenly city. It is when Jesus will come back for his bride, the church.

Jesus talks about the temple in Jerusalem being flattened. False messiahs appear who will deceive many people with signs and miracles. Wars and rumours of wars will be major news and nations will fight other nations. Famines and earthquakes will happen all over the world. There will be persecution of Christians - we will be hated and killed. People will turn away from their faith and will be deceived by false prophets. For many, their love for God will grow cold.

There will be momentous events in the cosmos and Jesus will come again with great power and glory with many angels who will gather up the believers - while the nations mourn.

Wow - he told us all this and he wants us to understand the signs of the times for sure!

The one thing that we are not to know is when it will happen. Jesus was very clear that although we need to keep watch and understand - and in fact, not to be alarmed - we will not know the day and time when he is coming back - like a thief in the night.

He is very clear that we need to be ready.

Looking at the parable

So in Jesus's time, the bridegroom would come to the bride's house for ceremonies probably prior to the main event - in this case a banquet. Bridesmaids - in this case the virgins - would welcome the bridegroom and light the way in - then process to the next stage of the marriage ceremony with the bride and groom afterwards.

Lanterns were essential - especially if the groom was late. This was standard practice. These lamps ran on oil and needed topping up from time to time - again, this was standard practice and not a surprise.

The virgins were not criticised for falling asleep - but the 5 were deemed foolish for not being prepared for the bridegroom's coming because they had not bothered to make sure their lamps would be filled with oil. They don't seem to have taken their duties seriously enough to be properly prepared. Of course it would have been an effort to carry extra jars of oil and maybe the foolish ones even made fun of the wise ones for bothering to do it.

Like some of the other parables we have looked at, the consequences for the unprepared were severe. They couldn't get in to the wedding banquet. They were excluded because they hadn't taken their invitation seriously enough to be equipped to welcome the bridegroom.

The parable speaks of Jesus as the bridegroom coming for his bride. As we know, the church is described in the New Testament as the "Bride of Christ" and Jesus is coming back for it - that's us.

What does this mean for us?

What will it look like for us to be a ready people? Is it like the bumper sticker "Look busy, Jesus is coming back"?

It's actually not quite like that. Note that normal things happened in the parable - people got tired and fell asleep. That is not a problem - normal life has to go on. We can be busy with life, jobs, retirement, leisure, family, church meetings and so on. We do not need to spend all our time looking into the sky trying to predict when Jesus is coming.

In fact we will not know the exact time or date. We can look at the signs of the times - as Jesus said - and we may make a judgement that the things he described are happening now - which they are. There is no doubt that we are in these "end times" and that Jesus's return is one day closer today than it was yesterday.

He also said that we should not be alarmed - these things have to come to pass. That is why he told us about them. They are a spur to get ready and be constantly ready.

How can we make sure we are ready?

The difference in the parable between the ready and the unready was about lamps being filled with oil. Oil is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. We are told in Ephesians 5 to be filled with the Spirit - in the original it is more like "continue to be being filled" with the spirit. The bible talks about being baptised in the spirit - the word means soaked, plunged, immersed - just like the wicks of the virgin's lamps.

The Holy Spirit brings God's presence to our lives. He is the fuel - if you like - that keeps God's power and light going in us. Without him, our lives are like the lamps of the foolish virgins. We may glow for a while but then its all gone. We need to be soaked in the Spirit like the wicks of the lamps, so that at all times we are ready to be a light for God in this world.

It is like the difference between a piece of string and a candle. A piece of string will burn up when lit - but not for long. A candle - which after all is only a piece of string surrounded by solid oil - will burn for hours and give useful light.

Are we like the piece of string - or are we like the candle?

That is the difference between being ready for Jesus and his Kingdom - and not being ready.

We may even be one step back from being a piece of string!

If you know that you are not ready for Jesus coming back - but you want to be - then do something about it now. We don't know the

date or time - but every day is a day closer, and looking at the times we live in, that seems to be increasingly evident.

Notice that the foolish virgins had to go and get oil themselves. We cannot give the Holy Spirit to each other. Jesus said "I will send the Spirit". Receiving the Holy Spirit is something between you and God - we won't get into the wedding banquet because we have friends and family who are Christians.

It is up to us. Commit your life to God. Admit your sin and consciously turn away from the old life and live for God. Believe in Jesus that he is the Son of God and he died for you so you can be forgiven all the wrong you have ever done. Be filled with the Spirit to live life to the full and to be fully prepared for when Jesus comes back.

It's all there in what Jesus said and taught - the worst thing we can do is ignore him, and then keep on ignoring him. Eventually on the last day the door will be shut he will have to say "I don't know you" - and there is no going back from that.

We don't want anyone to be in that position do we? The time is nearer than we think - are we prepared?

After all, what is at stake is where we will spend eternal life - inside the Kingdom of God or outside it?