

A faith that is real

[Jesus said] "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." (Matthew 25:1-13)

Jesus' parable of the ten maidens or virgins – part of a wedding party waiting for the groom rather than associated with the bride as such – and possibly part of a festive procession to the feast – first century Jewish wedding etiquette guides are very hard to come by! – is not totally foreign to us. In this case the groom is late and while the women or girls wait they do, we assume, whatever we would do – chat, wonder, discuss things, twiddle their thumbs, check their dress, and finally doze and sleep – the groom is definitely late! – but what 5 of them don't do – already described as foolish – is check their lamps – are they able to do the tasks they have to do?

We know what happens. The groom finally comes and there's the panic of preparation and the scrambling for oil, even asking to share and thus potentially putting the whole task in darkness, and finally rushing off to get more oil and thus missing out on the wedding feast, even after turning up to the door and getting the groom out of the party and asking to be let in. This picture of unpreparedness and being left in the darkness was a specific image or message Jesus gave to his disciples about the end times, and in particular the kingdom of heaven. On the sermon on the mount Jesus also said, *"Not everyone who says to me 'Lord Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 7:21).*

In the last week of his life before his crucifixion, Jesus spoke at considerable length about the end times – the signs, the parable of the fig tree, calls to watchfulness and faithfulness, the parables of the ten maidens, the talents, the sheep and the goats and the final judgement. Many hits of the hammer on the nail to get the point home; not because he was a dull teacher; not because the message was only for the very clever; but in recognition that the followers of Jesus live in dangerous territory in which our enemies – sin, death, the devil, the world's allure, and our own sinful desires – all conspire to make us dull students, rebellious, and particularly slack ones who know the quick answers but who in one's heart have no intention of trusting those answers.

Whether you view the 10 maidens as representative of the whole world waiting for Jesus to return or just the church waiting for his return, the outcome is the same – heaven will not have everyone in it – some of those people 'outside' I suspect in stubbornness will keep to their rejection of Jesus even when he's in front of them but I think – with no justification really – that many more will be sad, wailing, crying out because they missed out – not because Jesus didn't care and definitely not because God chose some to be damned but because they didn't believe or trust Jesus even though they knew about him. These teachings of Jesus draw a line

in time after which some people are in darkness. It is not that salvation has a use by date but that this rescue of planet Earth does have an end and the new heaven and new earth has a fulfilment. Unless you believe in circular time – cycles of life – then your time line is a straight line and this line Jesus says here on earth has an end point. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

Working together with him [Jesus], then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation." Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. (2 Cor 6:1,2)

Jesus took on the forces that enslave and entrap and kill us – including our secret desires to be in control, to be gods of our universes with everyone orbiting us and rescued us on the cross against our will. He didn't ask our permission first because by nature we view God is our enemy to be placated, ignored, or controlled but not to be worshipped and obeyed. This attack was most public on the cross but was happening the moment Jesus set foot on the planet as part of the rescue plan the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – set in motion when sin first contaminated and ruined us and all creation; when we in Adam and Eve rebelled. And Jesus attacked those forces through his words (parables and teachings) and gave signs (also known as miracles) for us to notice him and his words. And it is still the same today for now is the time of our salvation – as Jesus through his Words – spoken and read and studied and preached in and from the bible and felt in baptism and tasted in Holy Communion comes to us ... now.

In a few moments Jesus comes to little Ella in baptism – it seems the maidens can be really young – words and water are spoken and Ella is moved from darkness to light. She's even given a candle not to find the mystery path to heaven if she's lucky but as a reminder that Jesus is the light of the world and so in him, she can shine. What that means from the parable is that she isn't waiting for the groom as someone absent from her but she's waiting to see him whom she's only heard about. And so as Ella grows she will be brought to God's house and taught what God has done for her and learn to take the 'flask of oil' with her, in other words be ready in and out of season to meet Jesus whom she already knows, and who is real to her through faith. That is how it is for all Christians no matter our calendars for we live in the end times now – and now is still the day of our salvation.

Let's live this waiting time – whether awake or asleep, trusting that we are the Lord's.