

THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 9, 2014
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MAR1ANNA, FLORIDA
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MATTHEW 25:1-13

For the last few months, we've been journeying through Matthew's gospel. The 25th chapter is where our journey will end. It contains three parables of the kingdom of heaven, and each of the next three weeks, we'll focus on one of them.

This morning's parable is "headlined" in some bibles as "The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids". Other translations referred to the bridesmaids as virgins or maidens, and in fact, the word used in the Greek is indeed "virgin", παρθενος, the same word used to describe Mary the mother of Jesus in Luke's gospel.

Bridesmaids is what they were, whether they were virgins or not.

To understand why they were waiting, watching, for the bridegroom to come, we must understand a little bit of the wedding customs of the day and age.

Dr. J. Alexander Findlay has written about how these customs persisted into the twentieth century. He wrote:

"When we were approaching the gates of a Galilean town, I caught sight of then maidens gaily clad and playing some kind of musical instrument, as they danced along the road in front of our car; when I asked what they were doing, (a man) told me they were going to keep the bride company until her bridegroom arrived. I asked him if there was any chance of seeing the wedding, but he shook his head, saying... 'it might be tonight, or tomorrow night, or in a fortnight's time; nobody ever knows for certain.' Then he went on to explain that one of the great things to do, if you could, at a... wedding in Palestine, was to catch the bridal party napping. So the bridegroom comes unexpectedly, and sometimes in the middle of the night; it is true that he is required...to send a man along the street to shout: 'Behold! The bridegroom is coming!' but that may happen at any time; so the bridal party have to be ready to go out into the street at any time to meet him, whenever he chooses to come..." (Quoted by William Barclay, in *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, page 353.*)

Jesus tells a parable here that the people of His day and age probably could understand better than we can. But the point is clear: no one knows when the bridegroom, or the Messiah, or Jesus, is coming.

For the Jews of the day in which Jesus spoke, they should have been prepared for His coming, and not only were they unprepared, they rejected Him and His teachings.

The very ones who should have played the parts of the bridesmaids, keeping alert to dance in the streets to herald the coming of the Messiah, were if not asleep then unconscious of His coming, of His presence amongst them, and this refers to the scribes, the Pharisees, the religious establishment of that day and age.

In our day and age, there are some folks who are too ready to hail His coming. Just last month, some fringe group out on the West coast issued another edict that Jesus was coming. Well, the day passed and He didn't.

But that isn't a license to sleep, to ignore the fact that the bridegroom cometh.

Jesus is coming, make no mistake about it.

Whether He comes in glory, on a white horse, with His army behind Him on white horses, whether he descends on a cloud, whether He comes quietly like a thief in the night (and all of those are images found in scripture) He is coming again.

In truth, He comes every day.

Many years ago, indeed 25 years ago this week, He came to Arcadia, Florida, to the intensive care unit at DeSoto Memorial Hospital.

Hugh Rushing, an elder emeritus of that church, was the person who saw Him come, and he said to his beloved wife, Pauline, "The Lord is here. He's come for me. It's time for me to go." And then he died.

That was not the first person I've known who saw Him come.

Mary Jacobs was the matriarch of the Leland Presbyterian Church. And as she was dying in the intensive care unit of Delta Medical Center, in Greenville, Mississippi, nearly forty years ago, she asked her young pastor, "Ted, do you see Jesus?"

She was looking over my shoulder. I turned, and there on the wall were get well cards and prayer cards that people had sent to Mary during her hospital stay. One of them was that classic portrait of Jesus on His knees in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. When I saw it, I smiled, and said, "Yes, Mary, I see Jesus!" I pointed to the card.

With an expression that I can only call disgust on her face, she said, "No, He's standing right behind you. It won't be long, and I'll go with Him." She died that night.

Hugh Rushing and Mary Jacobs were saints. But they were also sinners. And they both saw Jesus on the day that they died. Jesus came for them. And they went with Him into that great wedding banquet that is the Kingdom of Heaven, where the bridegroom is always present, where the celebration never ends.

They were prepared for His coming. And that is the point of the parable. It is like the motto of the Boy Scouts: Be Prepared.

Barclay wrote:

“(T)here are certain things which cannot be got at the last minute. It is far too late for a student to be preparing when the day of the examination has come. It is too late for a man to acquire a skill or a character, if he has not already got it, when some task offers itself to him. It is so with us and God. It is easy to leave things so late that we can no longer prepare ourselves to meet with God. When Mary of Orange (the first to bear the title Princess Royal) was dying (at the young age of 29), her chaplain sought to tell her the way of salvation. Her answer was: ‘I have not left this matter to this hour.’ To be late is always tragedy.” (*Ibid.*, page 354)

There used to be a sign painted on a great rock on a highway near the North Carolina state prison. The highway made a hard left turn at the base of the rock, so that if you were driving towards the rock at night, your headlights illuminated the words “Prepare to Meet Thy God”. If one didn’t turn to the left, but crashed into the rock, I suspect that would have been one’s fate. To turn the other direction, to the right, would lead to a great precipice overlooking a river gorge. Either way, one stood a good chance of meeting God face to face.

But if you waited until you were rushing down that highway in the dark, and the words appeared before you in your headlights, you might have waited too long, too late.

Alfred Lord Tennyson took this parable and crafted a poem, sung by a little novice to Queen Guinevere when she too late discovered the cost and consequences of her unfaithfulness:

It goes like this:

“Late, late so late! And dark the night and chill.
Late, late so late! But can we enter still.
Too late, too late! Ye cannot enter now.

No light had we; for that we do repent;
And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.
Too late, too late! Ye cannot enter now.

No light: so late! And dark and chill the night!

O let us in, that we may find the light!
Too late, too late: ye cannot enter now.
Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?
O let us in, tho' late, to kiss is feet!
No, no, too late! Ye cannot enter now."

Don't wait. Too late. Be prepared. Walk with Jesus every day, follow Him in every way, and you won't have to wait for His coming to be in His presence.

Embrace the Christ, the bridegroom now, and when He comes to call you home, it will not be too late, but right on time.

Let us pray.

Lord, prepare us every day, that we might walk in your presence in this world and the next. Amen and amen.