

# November 12, 2017 "Prepared for the Feast"

(32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time)

## **Matthew 25:1-13**

How do we best anticipate Jesus' arrival?

That can seem strange when our practice is to think about Jesus in the past tense. Oh we celebrate Christmas and Easter, sure. But we celebrate them as things that happened already. Even within the Roman Catholic tradition (and others) who practice Jesus crucified actually in the celebration of the Communion Host, the very present Christ is celebrated because of what he has already done, for the life he's already led.

This is not to say our past is not important. Of course it is. But it should be informing our assessment of the present and how we frame the future. God doesn't expect us to have the whole picture of what God is doing (because we don't). God doesn't need us to know everything (also, because we don't). God does expect us to know enough. God expects us to act on what we DO know. What we know is that all that God seeks to redeem and transform is yet to come.

So how are we to be ready? Not when, not even for what. But how? Where is everywhere. Who is Jesus Christ. Why is the love of God. So, how, then?



## Matthew 25:1-13

**1** "At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten young bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the groom. **2** Now five of them were wise, and the other five were foolish. **3** The foolish ones took their lamps but didn't bring oil for them. **4** But the wise ones took their lamps and also brought containers of oil.

**5** "When the groom was late in coming, they all became drowsy and went to sleep. **6** But at midnight there was a cry, 'Look, the groom! Come out to meet him.'

**7** "Then all those bridesmaids got up and prepared their lamps. **8** But the foolish bridesmaids said to the wise ones, 'Give us some of your oil, because our lamps have gone out.'

**9** "But the wise bridesmaids replied, 'No, because if we share with you, there won't be enough for our lamps and yours. We have a better idea. You go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' **10** But while they were gone to buy oil, the groom came. Those who were ready

went with him into the wedding. Then the door was shut.

**11** "Later the other bridesmaids came and said, 'Lord, lord, open the door for us.'

**12** "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'

**13** "Therefore, keep alert, because you don't know the day or the hour.

- This is, ostensibly, one of several passages referring to what is commonly called the Second Coming. Christ's return is meant to be the culmination of history and the setting right of everything. Anticipation of the coming of the Messiah was long-held belief of the people of Jesus' day and continues to this day. Being ready is a big part of the expression of that belief.
- Do you think the five who withheld their oil were justified or mean? Should they have shared? Why do you think Jesus calls the other five foolish?



- What do you do (monthly, weekly, daily) to be ready for the arrival of Christ?
- Is this parable about being late or being prepared?
- Some scholars complain that this parable is inconsistent with Jesus' well-established mantra of compassion and sharing, even at great cost (e.g. The Good Samaritan). But what question do you imagine this parable was trying to answer?

## Commentary on the passage by Susan Hulen

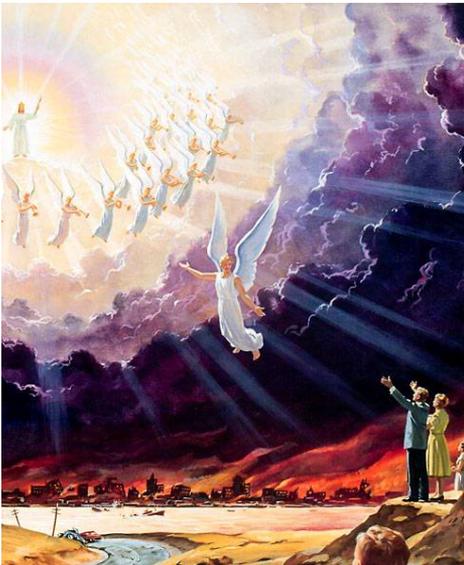
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The expectation of Christ's return is central to Christian living.

Although many Christians today consign talk of the Last Day to the realm of eccentric individuals with cult-like followings, the message of this passage suggests otherwise. The lives of Jesus' disciples are to be shaped by knowledge of his return.

Like the other Gospels, Matthew is clear that the timing of Christ's return is unknown. Although Jesus speaks of signs of the end time (Matthew 24:3-35), he goes on to say that no one but God knows the day or hour of its arrival (Matthew 24:36; see also Mark 13:1-37). In this sense, the Gospel's view differs strongly from that of modern sages who claim to predict Christ's second coming. Matthew states clearly, "you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an



unexpected hour” (Matthew 24:44).

The unknown timing of the Son’s return makes readiness essential. The parable of the ten bridesmaids is sandwiched between two passages that emphasize preparation for the master’s return. The prior passage, Matthew 24:45-51, contrasts the “faithful and wise slave” who is at work when his master comes (Matthew 24:45-46) with the self-indulgent slave who mistreats others and is surprised by the master’s return (Matthew 24:48-50). The passage that follows this one, Matthew 25:14-30, is a parable in which the master entrusts his property to his slaves and expects their diligent investment of it. Both parables emphasize the actions of the slaves in the absence of the master. Their faithfulness is known through what they do when he is away.

The bridesmaids parable also points to the importance of readiness. Its last verse, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour,” points readers toward a

message of watchfulness. It suggests that the foolish bridesmaids were not sufficiently prepared.

However, the point of the parable is not constant readiness. “Keep awake” does not imply that the disciples



should never sleep, standing vigil through the ages for Christ’s imminent return. In fact, all of the bridesmaids, wise and foolish, are asleep when the shout announces the groom’s approach.

What is distinctive about this parable is its focus on the delayed return of the expected one. The passage does not simply call for right action in the groom’s absence. It calls for recognition that he may be delayed.

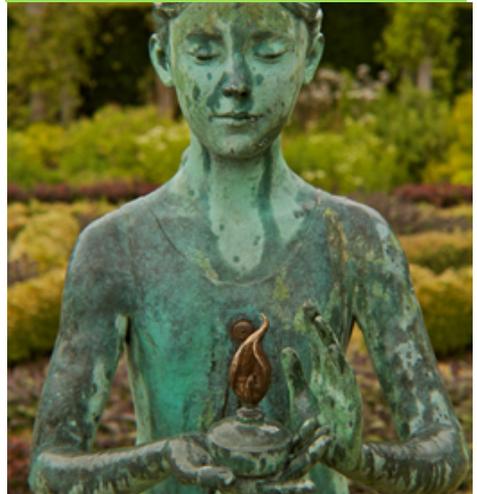
In this parable alone, the wise or prudent disciple is the one who prepares not only for the groom's return, but also for his delay. If the groom was coming quickly there would be nothing wrong with taking one's lamp full of oil to meet him. But the wise disciple packs a supply of oil, knowing that her wait may be unpredictable.

It is difficult for many of today's disciples to be anything like the bridesmaids, wise or foolish, because we have stopped waiting. We give little thought to Christ's return, let alone what we should do to prepare for it. If we were to contemplate ourselves in relation to the end time, it might be easier to imagine ourselves as the slaves who work diligently while the master is away than as the bridesmaids whose primary job is to await the groom's return. This is not necessarily something for which modern Christians should be chastised -- after the passage of two millennia, we have grown accustomed to the master's absence. It's a long time to wait expectantly. Nevertheless, there may be something we can gain from the parable's perspective.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

**"...focus on the core issue of waiting and admit, quite frankly, that the kind of waiting Matthew is encouraging through this parable is hard. Waiting for something way over due, waiting for something you're not sure will even come, waiting that involves active preparation when you're not even sure what you should be preparing for. That kind of waiting is challenging."**

**—Rev. Dr. David Lose**



The parable asks us to imagine ourselves as those who wait for the groom's return. When the groom comes, the wedding feast may begin! The age-old promise of the marriage between God and Israel (for example in Hosea 2:16) will come to pass. Speaking as one who has already realized the promises, the prophet Isaiah writes, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall



exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations" (Isaiah 61:10-11). The

prophet sees a restored Israel, where human unfaithfulness has faded away, and is replaced by righteousness and praise.

This is the wedding the bridesmaids await. Another voice proclaims the promise this way: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

**"Is it possible that the door could close on us because we're not prepared for the coming of God's realm? Have we gotten too comfortable with the status quo?"**

**—Bob Cornwall**

every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:3-4). The bridesmaids await not only the groom but the removal of pain and suffering. The wedding feast initiates the reign of God's justice and mercy, the

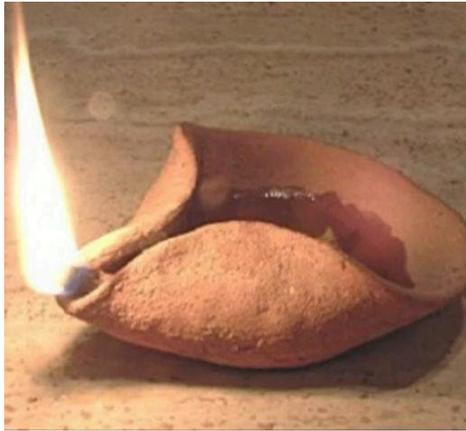
realization of all the hopes of Israel.

To act as wise bridesmaids is to affirm our faith in the coming Christ. Doing so shows our trust that God is a God of justice and mercy. The eschaton encapsulates the ideals of God's reign. It is the vision against which we judge our efforts in the meantime to live according to God's principles. It is a vision of God's ultimate justice and righteousness without which our world appears very bleak.

The wise bridesmaids keep the vision of Christ's return, and all that it stands for, alive through their faithful waiting in the midst of delay. By preparing for the day, the timing of which no one knows but God, they proclaim that God's promises are true. They act out their hope for that day when God will establish justice and righteousness and peace.

## Additional Thoughts

- "Here's my struggle and the reason I'm not a huge fan of this particular passage and parable. This is supposedly the same 'Kingdom of God' that Jesus describes a few chapters earlier with the parable of the lost sheep...I find myself wondering if both of these stories can describe the same Kingdom. Is God's Kingdom like the shepherd that is happier about the one lost sheep over the 99 that are not lost? Or, is God's Kingdom like the bridegroom that closes the door on the foolish virgins simply because they were out getting more oil? –David Clifford
- "Why are there so many stories about weddings? Why are people always excluded in those stories?—Richard Swanson
- "When all is said and done—when we have scared ourselves silly with the now-or-never urgency of faith and the once-and-always finality of judgment—we need to take a deep breath and let it out with a laugh. Because what we are watching for is a party."—Mark Davis (quoting Robert Capon)



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