November 12th 2023

Theme: The Parable of the 10 Bridesmaids  
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E te Atua aroha, e te Atua atawhai, kia whakapainga koe.  
(God of love, God of grace, we give you thanks).

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There are some big metaphorical messages here in this parable. It is part of a longer parable discourse by Jesus, about recognising the sign of his coming again. Given how dense we too can be at understanding what Jesus is trying to tell us, we can’t be overly critical about how he really did have to labour the point to his disciples about being watchful, not knowing when his return would happen. Most of all – he was emphasising the importance of being properly prepared for that, doing what was asked of them, not forgetting anything.

This parable has generated plenty of theological argument about what was really happening over the wedding arrangements described here. I am plumping myself down on the side of those who believe these lamps were intended as the outside lights for the wedding procession when the bridegroom arrived to collect his bride. However, before looking more deeply at the meaning behind the message that Jesus was trying to get across – how dumb were those girls? I mean, this was a big deal. Chosen effectively to be a guard of honour for the arrival of the bridegroom was pretty special. A fundamental but not mind-stretching requirement to participate was a lamp, and oil to provide its light.

(Oil lamps for bridesmaids)

The lamps of that time couldn’t have oil carried in them for any distance – far too unstable to have the oil already in them when travelling to the bridal meeting point. The olive oil used as fuel had to be carried in a separate bottle until needed, then poured into the lamp.

So, what was going on in the lives and brains of half of these girls that they forgot the basic fact that even if they were hanging around the bride’s house in the daytime to start with, the groom typically came at night. It would thus be dark, and they were there to provide the procession lighting? Maybe they were so busy texting and checking their Facebook pages they forgot an essential element of the reason they were invited in the first place. Teenagers. Empty spaces above their shoulder. It’s almost comforting to think they just don’t change – from ancient Galilean times to the 21st century.

(the 10 bridesmaids)

Well, not all of them. Half of them did come prepared; ready for their part of the great celebration to which they had been invited. They’d be the ones who packed their gear the day before journeying to the wedding, and probably had a list of the things they needed to take with them  
Like those of us who have ever been scouts or guides, the motto is surely ingrained in our souls. ” Be prepared”.

(Black slide)

When Maxwell was travelling to work in Auckland each Monday during the University semester, we had a list on a small whiteboard in the kitchen he was to check before he left, typically at 4.30am. Like the 5 maidens who remembered their oil and were unsympathetic to the plight of the others, I too would have had little sympathy if Maxwell was unable to get into his office because his keys were still back home. I do draw the line at spousal devotion that requires **my** brain to be functioning as well as his, at that hour of the morning.

All the same - how many of us here have gone away from home and forgotten a key item? Reading glasses perhaps? Good clothes for special event? In my case – I have been as bad as the ‘no oil’ brigade. Forgot my pyjamas one time – and that is definitely an item that couldn’t have been shared out from anyone else there, just like the request of the 5 losers for half the oil from the 5 winners.

If we are unprepared in these small things, will we be prepared in the big thing of Jesus coming at an unknown time or day to call us to his great celebration? That, of course is what all this is about. We are being reminded to spend our lives like firemen, who pass much of their time waiting around for a callout to a fire. They are in a constant state of readiness, day and night, up to date with their skills, and with all their gear laid out clean and complete. We, and the disciples, are being told very clearly that there will be no forewarning when the day of salvation arrives, no time to clean up our act to look good.   
It could well be a totally normal day, with us carrying out our normal routines. If they are routines to develop and enhance the Kingdom of God here on earth that is exactly what Jesus would hope to find on his return.

(Ten bridesmaids)

There are many details about this wedding event omitted from this parable, that can occupy theologians and cynics for ever, but, being grounded in fact, with a complete historically testable story, is not what Jesus is doing here. He has created a scene that would be familiar in its broad terms to those listening, and as we consider his teachings we can remember both the teaching context he was in then, and how the meaning inside the story relates to us now. The details may potentially be challenged as historically ‘wobbly’ or ambivalent, but the message is still the same, 2,000+ years after this parable was told.

The girls who didn’t bring the necessary oil with them, didn’t think they would need it, and had other things on their minds. They, like many of us, were lulled into a false sense of security. Jesus was, and is, saying quite clearly, his return will be without warning and when we don’t expect him. If we have spent our time mucking around and not following the message he has given us – like his judgement about the sheep and the goats I will be covering in a couple of weeks, – we are definitely caught without oil for our lamps.

The difference between the 5 wise girls and the 5 foolish ones is salvation. These five foolish girls were not previously saved, and then “ran out” of salvation. They were lost, and never had it. They never had oil. They were just empty lamps. They looked useful, they seemed to give promise of light, but they couldn’t produce it. They looked just like the other 5 girls. They were all invited to the wedding celebration, turned up, and expected to participate. They were no different from the 5 wise girls, except for one thing – they brought their lamps but no oil. Beside their pretty appearances, they were almost completely unprepared for responding to the arrival of the bridegroom. They asked the other 5 girls to share **their** oil but their request was denied – much as probably would have been for half a pyjama set, half a pair of reading glasses, or half a good outfit. It wasn’t just that the other 5 girls didn’t care; it was because they knew there wouldn’t be enough oil for all 10 lamps to stay alight for the whole procession. Better to have a torchlight parade that went all the way with 5 working lamps, than to be plunged into darkness halfway through with 10 no-longer functioning, lightless lamps.

(Five foolish bridesmaids)

For any of us who live nearby, it may be possible to dash off home to retrieve the forgotten item, or in the girls’ case, rush off to buy oil. However, the activity for which we should have been present, starts and carries on while we are away. By the time we get back, it is probably over. For the girls, the part of the festivities that needed them was over. In their case, as Jesus points out, the doors were closed, (appropriate security at such a time and place) and they were denied entry. “Truly I tell you, I do not know you”.

This parable is not only just a response to the question asked by Jesus’ disciples, but also all about us – his church. Tough as it is, we are being instructed very clearly to be ready for Jesus when he returns. His return will not be nearly as soon as his disciples suppose, nor will it be when we might suppose. Also, when we continue to think about the interpretation of this parable, we see that Jesus is saying that the saved cannot share what they have in Christ with those that are the lost. The lost will not be able to enter heaven based on the salvation others have received. Jesus is warning us to be careful about any assumptions we might make about being saved. Each of us is accountable for our own choices on how we live our lives, every day. Uncomfortable words indeed.

(text and lamp)

Just like the scout and guide motto. Just like the list on the whiteboard in our kitchen. Just like the firemen waiting for the next fire. Just like the 5 wise girls who came to the wedding with flasks of oil for their lamps.

“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour”.

Amen.