

**MATTHEW 25:1-13 THE PARABLE OF THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS**

(Wisdom 6:12-16; Psalm 63 [62]; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18))

[Jesus said:]

**1** “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. **2** Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. **3** When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; **4** but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. **5** As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. **6** But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ **7** Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. **8** The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ **9** But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ **10** And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. **11** Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ **12** But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ **13** Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

**(A) INITIAL OBSERVATIONS**

At this point in the Liturgical Year, the lectionary turns to the end of time and the teachings on watchfulness. Our parable today parable is unique to Matthew, although there are passages in Mark and Luke which resemble it in some way:

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake. (Mark 13:33-37)

Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. (Luke 12:35-38)

**(B) IS THERE AN OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND TO THIS STORY?**

(i) Wisdom is portrayed as a woman, metaphorically offering shelter, nourishment and companionship (for examples in Proverbs 1:20-33 and 2:16-19). These fundamental needs stand as a metaphor for our need of God's Wisdom, which "completes" the human being, just as men and women complement and complete each others. The Wisdom of God offers us shelter, nourishment and companionship.

(ii) At the same time, the theme of the end-time banquet is presented as a wedding feast, combining several themes from the Old Testament: Amos 9:13-14; Hos 14:7; Jer 21:12; Is 25; 1 Enoch 10:18-19; 2 Baruch 29:2-5. Marriage symbolism for the covenant can be found in Is 54:4-8; 62:4-5; Jer 2:2; Hosea 1-2; Jer 3:1-12; Ezekiel 16 and 23; Song of Songs. One example may suffice:

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isa 62:4-5)

**(C) WHAT KIND OF WRITING IS THIS?**

There are several kinds of parables in the NT: "original" parables which are often disorienting and later more didactic or incipiently allegorical parables. Our text belongs to this second category, which is more "teaching" and the in general the meaning is plain. It is good to bear in mind that a single parable will never give all we need to keep in mind, but only one or two aspects. Thus certain questions such as the meanness of the wise virgins are not real questions in the context. The bottom line here is that there are some things which only we can do for ourselves!!

**(D) IS THERE A NEW TESTAMENT "FOREGROUND" TO THIS STORY?**

(i) First, studies of Q (the earliest layer of the Synoptic tradition) have shown that it is dominated by wisdom forms of speech: beatitudes, parables, proverbs/aphorisms, and nature sayings. Thus the earliest stratum of the Jesus tradition is predominantly sapiential. Second, there has been intensive research on the forms themselves (especially parables and aphorisms) and their particular function in the message of Jesus. At its heart is an alternative image of reality, an alternative path, and an alternative paradigm for behaviour.

(ii) This parable is found in a parable section in Matthew which deals with the end of time. As the parable is unique to this Gospel, its location in the text is important:

Verses	Contents	Source
24: 1-44	following Mk 13, with additions and changes	Mk/Q/M
24: 45-25:30	parables of delay (Steward, Virgins, Talents)	Q/M/Q
25: 31-46	parable of the Last Judgement	M

- a) The fig tree as a parable of the coming of the Son of Man
- b) As in the days of Noah
- c) As when a burglar comes
- d) As with a faithful servant when his master returns
- e) As with bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom
- f) As with talents given to servants to work with
- g) As with sheep and goats separated by the shepherd

(iii) Elsewhere Matthew uses the language of marriage (groom: 9:15 in reference to himself; wedding Matt 22:2-4, 8-12; 25:10) and watchfulness (Matt 24:42-43; 25:13; 26:38, 40-41).

### (E) SAINT PAUL

(i) On *wisdom*: “My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.” (1 Cor 2:4-7)

(ii) On *watchfulness*: “But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him” (1 Thess 5:8-11)

### (F) A BRIEF COMMENTARY ON THE TEXT

- 1 Kingdom of *heaven* is a Matthean expression. The nuptial imagery is established immediately.
- 2 We are told this immediately—an attentive reader will “hear” the comparison of the wise woman and the foolish woman from the wisdom books of the Bible.
- 5 Delay is a theme of Matthew at this point. It reflects the experience of the delay of the *parousia* and a consequent dilution of expectation and readiness. The early church was settling down! See 24:8.
- 6 Midnight measures the delay—i.e. into the night, but not *that far* into the night.
- 8 Outside the parable, the request might seem logical.
- 9 The refusal has behind it a conviction about personal engagement.

- 10 The shutting of the door is a hard saying. The image comes up already in 24:13.
- 11 “Lord, Lord” is used elsewhere in this Gospel in a tremendous warning: ““Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’” (Matt 7:21-22)
- 12 The previous citation continues: “Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’” (Matt 7:23)
- 13 Day and hour occurs elsewhere (Matt 20:12; 24:36, 50; 25:13). Not knowing and watchfulness features in these chapters in Matthew.

### (G) SOME POINTERS FOR PRAYER

- 1 In my own experience, what are the things I have learned for myself that I have to do for myself? More personally: what does the Lord *hope for* from me and from alone?
- 2 The dimming of expectation implied in the parable can express the dimming of our commitment and engagement. What things have contributed to my own loss of original excitement? What has helped me to regain it?
- 3 The parable expresses the experience of opportunity taken and opportunity missed. What is my own experience of taking and missing opportunities, perhaps in my personal life, perhaps in ministry?
- 4 The link between prayer and practice is brought out strongly by Archbishop Temple, “The right relation between prayer and conduct is not that conduct is supremely important and prayer helps it, but that prayer is supremely important and conduct is its test.”
- 5 In part, the parable is meant to frighten, or at least disturb deeply, especially with the dreadful words “I do not know you”. It is a kind of negative energy for engagement. Have I known this in my own experience of the faith?
- 6 The invitation to keep watch speaks today. The privileged bearing of the good news can become routine, even professionalised, and surely there is more to it than that!

### (H) PRAYER

ALMIGHTY and ever-living God,  
 Remove the obstacles that stand in our way,  
 that unimpeded in body and soul  
 we may freely devote ourselves to your service.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
 who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
 God for ever and ever.

Amen.