

Parable of the ten virgins

1. Introduction

This story told by Jesus carries on from where we left off this morning - when Richard was speaking about the certain return of Jesus and the importance to be ready: to be ready in ourselves, to be engaged in what Jesus calls us to do. And this story helps us to think about what it means to be ready - in ourselves - for his return.

Let's try and position ourselves in the story to get a sense of what was going on.

Weddings in the place and time of Jesus were occasions for a big party - probably even more so than they are today:

- The bridegroom would go to the house of the bride's father where she had been living since their engagement
- There they would get married and celebrate with friends and family
- Later on they would process to the home of the bridegroom after which there would be a time of feasting which would often last for several days
- This procession would normally take place at night and a common feature along the route was a display of torches - and this is what these young women were responsible for

It was a time of great excitement with everyone being involved and sharing in the happiness of the couple. It was an event that you didn't want to miss out on - particularly if you were close to the bride and groom.

So these young women could have been waiting at the groom's house for a long time - they couldn't predict when the bridal party would arrive - and so it is totally understandable that they would drop off to sleep. But when they hear that the bridegroom is on his way that is when they need to leap into action and prepare to welcome him home.

(Clearly there would have been a bride involved as well but the focus of the story is the interaction between the groom and these ten girls)

And so they get up and try to get their lamps burning brightly.

2. The problem with the lamps

When we think about lamps we normally think about electric lanterns, or maybe small oil lamps with a wick.

But the lamps in this story are probably something different - long sticks with strips of cloth wrapped around the end and soaked in oil. It would have been important to ensure that the cloth was wrapped tightly around the stick, that the cloth was soaked in oil and the flame had a good chance to take hold. Even then it is estimated that it would only burn for about fifteen minutes until the oil was used up.

And here we see the differences between the two groups of women - one group had come prepared, and the other hadn't. One group had some oil that they could soak the cloth in and the other didn't.

So the "wise" group were able to check that the cloths were as they should be; to douse it in oil; to light their torches and to go out and welcome the bridegroom to his party.

But the "foolish" group didn't have any extra oil so after a few seconds any light that they had been able to get would go out as any oil left on the cloths would be used up.

They came up with a cunning plan - they would ask their colleagues to share their oil but they refused. They were aware that they only had a certain amount, only had enough for their own torches and they didn't want the groom to not have lit torches to welcome him home. And so they encouraged them to go off and try to buy some - and even though it was nighttime - it is probable that shops would still be open to support the festivities and celebration.

And so they went, they may have found oil - we are not told - but by the time they return the procession has happened, the groom has arrived, the party has started and the door is closed. (And this would have sounded strange to those listening to the story as in these types of occasions the door was never closed, everyone was welcome, but Jesus is using the conventions of wedding feasts to make a bigger point about being ready for his return)

They know the groom is inside, they know the party is going on, they know their five friends are inside and they want to be allowed in - and so they call out to the groom asking him to let them in. But they hear the shocking

response that they are not welcome, they will not be able to celebrate with everyone else.

They had expected everyone to be watching them as they progressed with the groom holding their lit torches - but now they are on the outside and being told they aren't recognised as invited guests.

I remember being at a technology conference and going in to visit one of the exhibition stands. These are where tech companies showcase their products and services and try and encourage customers to work with them. The stand I was visiting was run by one of our partners - we were working with them on projects for my customer. I wanted to find out a bit more about what they were planning for the future so started asking some fairly detailed questions. It became clear that I wasn't getting the answers I was looking for and I eventually found out that I wasn't really welcome as they saw us really as competitors and not partners. I thought I was on the inside, but was actually being kept on the outside. It was a strange experience - when my expectations (which I thought were valid) suddenly turned out to be based on nothing.

And Jesus uses this story to say that - in some way - it is going to be like that when he returns. Some of those expecting to be included in that great celebration won't be and that will be painful, will be difficult, will be final.

3. Differences between the groups

Up until a certain point in the story it would have been very difficult to tell the two groups of women apart:

- They were both waiting to greet the bridegroom
- They both had torches to light the way
- They both went to sleep - so there is no blame associated with that
- They both woke up when they heard that the groom was coming
- They both made sure their lamps were ready

It is only when one group realises that they don't have any oil that we see the difference - and after that the groups are totally separate and - in the story - are never reunited:

- One goes to process with the groom while the other has to go off and try to find oil
- One goes into the party while the other ends up being left outside
- One is recognised and welcome while the other is sent away

And so the thing that sets them apart is one group had made the necessary preparations before the arrival of the groom while the other group found they were trying to do so after the groom had arrived.

4. Two strategies of the “foolish” women

Having recognised the situation they were in the unprepared women came up with two approaches to try and address the problem:

1. They tried to borrow from those who had been prepared
2. They tried to convince the groom to let them in even after the party had started

But neither of them succeeded.

And this has important lessons to teach us:

1. A reminder that in our relationship with God, in being prepared to meet with Jesus, we can't rely on the preparation that anyone else has made for themselves, we need to ensure we are each individually prepared
2. And we can't rely on the goodness and generosity of Jesus to receive us after his return. He has given humanity up until the time of his return to get ready but there will come a moment when that opportunity has come to an end and people will no longer be able to enter into a relationship with him, to be recognised by him

5. What is meant by wise and foolish?

As so often as we have been looking at the teaching of Jesus we have seen echoes of what he said in the Sermon on the Mount - and this is no exception.

As we saw in our reading from Matthew 7 there are people who will think that they have a relationship with Jesus who will find out that they don't. Maybe people who have spent their lives in church, maybe people who have been

involved in responsibilities in the church, maybe people who have preached sermons, maybe people who have been seen as leading figures in the church. They have been living the life but they haven't experienced the transforming power of Jesus and they are not accepted by him.

We also saw something about what it means to be "wise" or "foolish" - and its not about hearing the words of Jesus but putting them into practice: about coming and following him; about finding identity in him; of receiving new life from him; of living for him.

This is what it means and not doing this is what the "foolish women" in the story warn against.

Two challenges

1. For us
2. Towards others

And it presents two challenges - the first is for us, and the second is to towards others

We need to be prepared to meet Jesus, we need to be wise, we need to have that relationship with him. And that is vitally important for each of us

But I particularly want to focus on the second challenge - our responsibility for others:

- a. Those who have no thought of God, have no sense that Jesus is going to return. This story isn't actually about them, but we do have a responsibility to tell people that this is going to happen and the implications of not being ready
- b. Those who believe that they are right with God, are "living as Christians", but don't understand what is involved, haven't made their individual preparation by trusting in him, have maybe heard the truth about Jesus but haven't realised it affects them. And these can be very difficult to reach

This second one is really challenging - these are people who have bought into a particular understanding of what being a Christian is all about; an understanding that is pervasive in society; an understanding that is promoted in many different ways - some subtle and some less so.

I was in a discussion recently about a group of people who - it was claimed - were living by "Christian values" - things like tolerance, care for others, respect and so forth. Some of these are good and should flow from a real relationship with Jesus; some are assumed to be "Christian" but are based on a flawed understanding of what it means. Tolerance, for example, is all well and good but only so far - there are some things, some ideas, that believers in Jesus should not tolerate in the same way that Jesus didn't. Things that go against God's justice; that go against God's love; that goes against God's plan for the world. But even ignoring that, the bigger problem is that many people have their understanding of living in a way that is consistent with "Christian values" instead of understanding that we need to start with a life-changing relationship with Jesus. But because they are living in a particular way they believe that they are "Ok" and there is nothing further they need to do. They are buying into a particular understanding of what Christianity is all about and they are wrong - and so in danger of being excluded when Jesus returns.

Its not even that they hear the words of Jesus and choose to not follow it; they hear a false message about Jesus and believe they are ok.

I was speaking recently with the local representative of a charity which - as far as I can make out - is doing really good work. But I struggled with the way this representative was insisting that the people involved were Christians because of the valuable things they were doing. It is great that they are doing this work - but disturbing that this is an understanding of what Christianity is about.

And many people have accepted the "social Christian" idea - that because we live in this country, because we live in a particular way, because we "go to church" to get married and bury people, then we are in a right place with God.

Many of these - when they stop to think about it - would have no doubts that their behaviour, their lifestyle, their good works are sufficient for God to accept them. Many would go beyond that and simply assume that God accepts everyone and that their destiny is in heaven - whatever their understanding of that is.

But the force of this parable is to say that this is not so, that they are not prepared to meet Jesus, that Jesus would look at them in sorrow and say that he doesn't know them; that they will be excluded.

They are in real danger of missing out on the great blessings that God has in store for his people - and one of our responsibilities is to follow the example of Jesus and point it out to them.

To make it clear that life is not going to carry on this way forever and that one day - either when Jesus returns or when we die - the opportunity to really understand who Jesus is and respond to him will be over and people will need to live with the consequences. The writer of Hebrews puts it clearly and simply like this:

Hebrews 9:27–28 NIV (Anglicised, 2011)

Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

The reality of dying and then facing judgement referenced here isn't something that the author feels he needs to argue for, to convince people of, it is something that is simply assumed and understood to be true.

And he reminds them that the way to escape this judgement is to trust in the Jesus who died to deal with the problem of sin and who will return to complete the salvation of those who are trusting in him, those who are waiting for him. And - in the light of our parable this evening - those who are prepared to meet him.

But for those who haven't come to that point, who haven't made that decision, they will be excluded as those whom Jesus doesn't know.

I can sometimes be guilty of looking at people who just seem to have life all sorted and together and think that they are ok - but the challenge of this story is that however "ok" people may seem, without being prepared to meet Jesus they are in terrible danger.

How many people do we know who - by virtue of how they live; because of what they have been taught - have no doubt that they are right with God but are basing that on a totally false understanding of who God is, the problem of sin, and the saving work of Jesus?

What opportunities will we have this week to come alongside them and gently but clearly explain to them this reality and encourage them to rethink who Jesus is and what he calls them to be?

And are we going to be prepared and willing to take those opportunities and point people to Jesus?