

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 77”

Matthew 25:1-13

It was the start of the Bank Holiday weekend – sweltering heat, cars crammed with screaming toddlers and expiring grannies, fractious parents for whom this was all supposed to be a bit of a break and a rest – and the petrol station was crowded out. The queues tailed back off the forecourt and down the road. A vicar, who’d been waiting a considerable time, finally managed to get his tank filled and went to pay at the kiosk, where a remarkably cheerful and laid back assistant apologised to him for the long delay and said, “Everyone knows they’re going away and will need petrol, but they all wait until the very last minute to prepare for it.” “I know,” replied the vicar. “I have just the same trouble in my business.”

That’s really what this story’s all about this morning. We are right in the thick of Jesus’ teaching about his return, the end of this age and the establishment of God’s eternal Kingdom, which he has already begun to inaugurate. As we read through Jesus’ words to his followers in chapter 24 – words which began the last of the five great discourses that Matthew records in his Gospel – we found Jesus stressing the inevitability of his return. He knows he’s going to be executed and wants his disciples to be prepared for that. And he tries to reassure them with hints about his resurrection. But this is all about his final return, when he will come back to earth once again and God will put right all that has gone wrong since his originally perfect creation was perverted and distorted by the presence of sin and evil. There is clearly no doubt that Jesus will return.

However, there’s quite a bit of uncertainty about when that’s going to happen. Even Jesus himself isn’t too sure. And despite the valiant attempts of many both well-meaning and wacky people down through the centuries to pin down the date, the return of Jesus is not only inevitable, but also very unpredictable, particularly as it seems to have been delayed for quite a while. What we’ve just read is the third of four stories Jesus tells his followers to try and bring home to them the need to be prepared for his return, even though they don’t know when it’s going to happen.

I happened to be listening to a programme on the radio the other lunchtime in which the subject of “prepping” was being discussed. “Prepping” is preparing for the possibility of a disaster or catastrophe (flooding, nuclear war, or lots of snow and power cuts) – yet another bonkers idea to have travelled across the Atlantic and fuelled by commercial interests. The people interviewed had stores of canned and dried food, generators in the shed, three months’ worth of clean clothing already packed in rucksacks and, in a couple of cases, crossbows greased up and ready to go – not, as you may have thought, to kill wildlife for food, but to fend off any neighbours stupid enough not to have made similar preparations and who might want to blag a tin of Spam. That’s a kind of over-the-top contemporary example of what’s going on in this story.

It's the well-known parable of The Wise and Foolish Virgins. In this case, for those who are wondering about the significance of their virginity, the word is used very much as the English word "maid" (which meant the same thing) is still used as part of the word "bridesmaid". These are the attendants of the bride and groom at a Middle Eastern wedding.

A couple of things just to note before we move on. Those of you who have been here when we've talked about Jesus' parables before will perhaps remember that these stories usually have just one point. They are not allegories in which every detail can be laden with significance. For example, some people have tried to suggest that the oil here represents good works, or the Holy Spirit; that the lamps are something to do with God's word; that the foolish virgins are Jewish and the wise ones Gentiles. Jesus is simply making a point (to which we will get in a moment – honestly!) about being prepared.

The second thing is that this is not, as some have suggested, a completely made up story. There are those who have tried to maintain that Jesus created this situation out of nothing simply to make a point. Another thing we've noted in the past is that Jesus uses situations that would have been very familiar to his listeners, and this is actually no exception. This kind of thing happened at weddings in his day – and they still happen in relatively recent times. Joachim Jeremias, a German theologian who has written extensively about the parables of Jesus says that his father actually witnesses such a thing, probably around the turn of the last century. And William Barclay includes this account by a Dr Alexander Findlay in his book about Matthew's Gospel (*The Daily Study Bible: Matthew Volume 2* pp319-320).

So here we have the story of the bridegroom – who is definitely going to arrive, of course – but no-one's entirely sure at what time. And in this case, the delay seems longer than usual – possibly he's been haggling over the dowry with the bride's family. The setting is very much that of those who will be waiting for Jesus' return – we know he's coming, but we're not sure when, and he does seem to be taking rather a long time about it, doesn't he? Prominent among those waiting are these ten bridesmaids – all dressed very similarly (possibly not all in the same cheap dress from New Look, but all in their best finery), all holding their lamps ready to light the way for the groom when he arrives to be escorted to his bride, all very eagerly expecting the groom to arrive, and all – and note this – having waited so long that they fall asleep. All ten of them are asleep!

The difference between the foolish and the wise girls becomes apparent only when the groom's arrival is finally announced. As they wake up and get ready to move on in the festivities, it becomes apparent that only five of them have enough oil to keep their lamps alight for any length of time. And those whose lamps are not alight will not be granted entry to the feast. It's just at this point that the state of

preparedness of the girls becomes obvious. Those who have oil – although not equipped with crossbows like those “preppers” we mentioned earlier – are unwilling to share their supplies with the foolish girls. If they do, then there’s a strong likelihood that no-one at all will get in. But this parable is not about selfishness or the desirability of sharing stuff – that’s not Jesus’ point. If there’s anything at all to be drawn from this refusal to share the surplus oil it’s that preparedness cannot be shared. If you’re not prepared for the return of Jesus – which is what the arrival of the bridegroom is all about – then you can’t piggyback on someone else’s preparations. This is, once again, a personal thing that each and every one of us has to sort out for ourselves.

The foolish girls nip off to try and buy some more oil – not an impossibility as there would have been people with olive trees who would have sold their surplus oil to the girls – the bridegroom actually turns up, the others accompany him into the feast, and the door is closed. The door is closed with a real sense of finality. No-one else is coming in and that’s that! Again, the point is not about the generosity of the groom nor the possibility of persuading him to let them in, nor even the rather odd comment that he doesn’t know them. The point is that when Jesus does return that’s your only chance to be admitted to his eternal Kingdom. If you’re not ready, then it’s curtains for you.

And Jesus then spells out the moral of the story. “*Therefore ...*” he says, be ready. The NIV version has “*Keep watch*”. Some versions translate the Greek word here (*gregoreite*) as “*stay awake*”, but it very rarely means that. In fact, as we’ve already noticed, Jesus says that **all** the girls fell asleep. I would suggest that even “*Keep watch*” is a bit too strong as we cannot always be keeping watch, as such. We can, however, be prepared for Jesus’ return even though we’re not constantly on a state of high alert and staring into the sky in the hope of spotting him from afar. I don’t really think anyone’s going to miss it! Whether you want to take 24:30,31 literally or not – “*And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call*” – the clear indication is that it will be pretty spectacular.

Despite the unpredictability of Jesus’ return and despite the apparent long delay, we know he is coming back, so we need to be ready. Although in a slightly different context, God’s word through the prophet Habakkuk in the Old Testament (*Habakkuk 2:3*) are very appropriate here:

*“For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
it speaks of the end
and will not prove false.
Though it linger, wait for it;
it will certainly come
and will not delay.”*

Fair enough, you may think, but how do we make sure we're prepared? It's not simply a case of getting supplies in, like the bridesmaids or the mad "preppers". Jesus won't be looking for well-stocked larder or a working diesel generator when he finally comes back. Well, it's partly explained in the next parable, which we'll think about next week, and it underlies everything else in this twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel. It's to do with a set of attitudes and an approach to life that you would be happy for Jesus to see you operating with whenever he turns up. When I was a kid I was always told at Sunday School not to do anything that I wouldn't really want Jesus doing if he dropped in unexpectedly – which, if you take that to its logical conclusion, means you'd end up never going to the loo or stuff like that!

But this is about living as Jesus calls you to live. It's about keeping your prayer life active so that you're aware of that ongoing relationship with him, so that when he does turn up it's not as a stranger, but a bit like someone you've been talking to regularly on the 'phone or social media and you're delighted finally to see him face to face.

It's about keeping that relationship alive by reading the Bible: allowing God to speak to you in that way day by day, discovering what is "*his good and perfect will*" for you, getting to know him even better day by day.

It's about showing his love to all whom you meet, reaching out with grace and generosity to everyone, making the most of what God has given you (as the next story will illustrate), trying to share what you have – in material, spiritual, emotional terms – with those who are struggling. And that will become very obvious in the latter part of this chapter – the rather scary section about the sheep and the goats.

It's about doing all you can to reflect the glory of God and give glimpses of his Kingdom wherever you are and whatever you're doing. I suppose that it's like I was told as a child – making sure that whatever you're doing you wouldn't mind Jesus seeing you at it, you wouldn't feel uncomfortable with.

Read on in this chapter 25 and you'll start to see what this is all about – do your best to live your life as a follower of Jesus by putting into practice his words and showing others what he is like. Above all, make sure you're ready to meet Jesus when he finally does return – because he's certainly going to!

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How do we make sure we're prepared? This is about living as Jesus calls you to live. It's about

- keeping your prayer life active.
- keeping your relationship with Jesus alive by reading the Bible: allowing God to speak to you.
- showing his love to all whom you meet.
- reaching out with grace and generosity to everyone.
- making the most of what God has given.
- doing all you can to reflect the glory of God and give glimpses of his Kingdom wherever you are and whatever you're doing.

Questions for discussion

1. What makes you so sure that Jesus will return?
2. What difference does that make to your daily life?
3. How final do you think the shutting of the door will be? Any second chances?
4. How can we best "*keep watch*"? How can we help each other in that?
5. Do these stories scare you or encourage you? Why?