

Year A Proper 32 Waiting in Readiness Matthew 25 vv1-13

Today we have another story from Jesus that says, “The kingdom of God is like...” It is sandwiched in between two parables of servants who have an absent master. In the first, we hear Jesus say, “Blessed is that servant whom his master will find at work when he arrives” (24:46). In the second, the servants are entrusted with the master’s property. The servants who are fruitful hear, “Well done, good and trustworthy servant” (25:21). Today we also hear a story of absence and the behaviour expected of those waiting. We have 10 bridesmaids – 5 wise bridesmaids who are prepared or ready and 5 foolish bridesmaids who are not prepared or not ready. Jesus is the bridegroom and the moral of the story is that we need to be ready for his coming, right? Well, it’s not quite that simple.

All 10 bridesmaids brought their oil lamps. All 10 bridesmaids were excited about the bridegroom coming. All 10 bridesmaids fell asleep. So, they were all equally ready for the bridegroom’s arrival but, the important part, the thing that set apart the wise from the foolish, was that 5 of those bridesmaids were ready for his delay.

That’s the key – we are to live like Christ could arrive in our midst later on this afternoon but to be prepared that he may not arrive in our lifetime. And being ready for God’s kingdom is not like being ready for any other event. Getting ready for earthly events is quite easy – throw on a turtleneck and your team’s jersey to head out to the hockey game; make sure you’ve got all the favourite snacks in your cupboard and fridge before the grandkids come over; do a wallet and phone check before you walk out the door to go for dinner, and so on. These events are checklist events. Even unexpected earthly events are checklist events: bottled water and non-perishable food items in the pantry, candles, matches, extra

batteries...You check off the list, you're prepared, you've done what you can, and now you can sit back and not think about it.

Being prepared for the coming of Jesus, bringing the fullness of God's kingdom, is not a "check off the list, you've done what you can now you can forget about it" kind of event. Getting ready for God's kingdom is an all day, every day sort of thing. Today's story always makes me think of people who drive way over the speed limit. When I'm driving and a car goes flying past me like I'm standing still, I wonder to myself, "Does that person not realize what the speed limit is along here or does he know he's going ridiculously fast and just doesn't care?" Then I see his brake lights come on as he spots the police car sitting near the side of the road up ahead and my question is answered. He certainly does know he is not doing the right thing but doesn't change his ways until he has to. But then it's too late. The police car pulls out behind the speeder, lights flashing, and pulls the person over. Apologies and excuses won't work at this point. The time for right behaviour has passed. We don't want to be the one hitting the brakes when we see a cop car on the side of the road. Changing behaviour when Jesus arrives is too late. "Truly I tell you," he will say to us, "I do not know you." Apologies and excuses won't work. The door will be shut. We will be left standing outside in the darkness of life without God.

But, it is difficult for many of today's disciples to be anything like the bridesmaids, wise or foolish, because many have stopped waiting. Many people give little thought to Christ's return, let alone what we should do to prepare for it. After the passing of more than two thousand years, we have grown used to the master's absence. It's a long time to wait expectantly. But that is exactly what we are asked to do. "Stay awake," Jesus tells us. It is a word of hope and encouragement: keep waiting for me – I will return.

Jesus asks us today to imagine ourselves as those who await the groom's return. When the groom arrives, the wedding feast begins. The concept of marriage – and the wedding feast, the banquet in God's kingdom – is a part of the age-old promise running throughout scripture – from the prophets to the end of the Book of Revelation. The love and the joy, the rejoicing and commitment, the unity expressed in the act of marriage is used to help God's people imagine, and eagerly await, the joyous event of God's return and the completeness of God's kingdom. 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). Isaiah sees a restored Israel, where human unfaithfulness has faded away, and is replaced by righteousness and praise.

We, too, have been covered with the robe of righteousness – clothed with Christ in our baptisms. We, too, see and celebrate the coming fullness of God's kingdom in our banquet with God, at God's table, every time we share the bread and wine together.

This is the wedding banquet the bridesmaids await. Another voice, in the book of God's Revelation to John, announces and describes the promise this way: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe 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 all pain and suffering. The wedding feast is the start of the full reign of God's justice and mercy, the realization of all the hopes of Israel (Susan Hulen, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).

We are asked, by Jesus, to be those wise bridesmaids – keeping alive the vision of Christ's return, and the fullness it stands for, in the midst of his delay. This affirms our faith in the coming of Christ. It shows our trust that God is a God of mercy and justice and will keep his promises. This we do each time we gather together in worship, especially when that worship is the liturgy of Holy Eucharist, sharing in the feast that is to come.

The picture of the fullness of God's kingdom to come is painted for us throughout scripture – it is a picture of complete beauty, peace, equality, and joy. It is a picture that fuels our deep and certain hope...hope that cannot be overcome by the current brokenness surrounding us, hope that moves us to work with God to mend this brokenness in the world and in ourselves, so that we are not hitting the brakes when we see the cop car but, rather, we “stay awake” in readiness through the long delay.

What does it look like when we are awake in readiness during this delay? Matthew makes sure that we know, driving his message home to us again and again throughout his gospel: those who hear the word of God must also be doers of the word of God. As we talked about very recently, the love of God and neighbour that Jesus commands of us, is not a love of emotion but, rather, a love of action. Living love, we become love. According to a Celtic poem:

You cannot grasp water in your hand.  
It drops through your fingers.  
You cannot grasp truth in your mind.

It drops through your thoughts.  
You can only possess water by drinking it,  
taking it into your body.  
You can only possess truth by living it,  
taking it into your heart.

Jesus is ultimate truth, love, peace, and life. Becoming these things, being transformed to be more and more Christlike, is to live these things. Quite simply, it is to keep our baptismal promises. In concrete terms, this includes worshipping together, caring for the environment, giving money, food, clothes, and other material things to those who need them. But it also includes standing with the oppressed, fighting for equality, speaking out against injustice. These are big tasks that take big commitment and energy and desire. The fire that fuels our passion to take on the brokenness and make a difference comes from the certainty that Jesus will come again: “Stay awake”, I will return.

We are fuelled up, our passion is reignited, each time we gather together. Together, we proclaim such things as, “He will come again to judge the living and the dead”; “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven”; “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” And we pray “that all the world may gather in joy at the table of God’s kingdom.” It is no coincidence that our liturgies remind, reinforce, and rejoice in the hope of our faithful God who will come again. We become what we live. Let us live the joy, the love, and the hope that fuels our passion to be better, to make the world around us better: living God’s kingdom, revealing God’s kingdom. One day a voice will shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.”