

## “Tomorrow is Today”

The lectionary has taken us to some exotic places in recent months: Genesis, Exodus, Thessalonians, Philippians. It’s nice to get back to Jesus and one of his parables.

But this is a pretty odd little story, isn’t it? Tradition calls it the story of the wise and foolish virgins, since that’s one meaning of the Greek word *parthenos*. But evidently the New Revised Standard Virgin is “bridesmaid,” a translation which emphasizes the function the women perform in the story. Whatever we call them, these young women usually show up during Advent, when we’re getting ready for Christmas; but, truth to tell, they always seem a bit out of place there, too.

Two things help to bring this story into better focus: a sense of what Matthew is up to in this part of the gospel, and a bit of information about Palestinian wedding customs. Then, I think, the story comes to life in amazing ways.

We find this tale only in Matthew’s gospel, and situated very near the end. As soon as chapter 25 is over, the scene will shift to events surrounding Jesus’ death and resurrection. The focus in this section of teaching is the end time, and the belief that early Christians had that some day soon the world would be transformed into the Realm of God, a place where God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.<sup>1</sup>

The early Christians thought of themselves as living at the intersection of two ages, living on the fault line between this age and the age to come. Tumultuous things happen along fault lines. The big question Christians have to deal with is, “How shall we live while we wait for God’s will to be realized on earth?” If God’s reign is coming, what do we do until it arrives? That’s what this whole section of Matthew, including this story, is about.

Our lesson ends with a tacked-on line, verse 13: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” But that familiar saying doesn’t really fit the story, does it? The difference between the wise bridesmaids and the foolish ones isn’t that they stay awake. All ten fall

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew consistently uses the term “Kingdom of heaven” in keeping with the Jewish practice of not pronouncing the name of God. It is a pious euphemism for “Kingdom of God” or “Reign of God.”

asleep! The difference is that the wise bridesmaids are prepared and the foolish are not. It is that preparation that is the real point of the story. “Be prepared.” Be prepared for the new era to dawn right now... or maybe not for quite a while.

A wedding is an interesting setting for the story. There is some scholarly dispute regarding how much we really know about Palestinian wedding customs; but this much seems to be pretty clear.<sup>2</sup> Most of what we think of as a wedding—the exchange of promises and a formal ceremony—actually took place at the betrothal. When the wedding arrived, sometimes years later, the groom would come to the bride’s home to meet the bride and her attendants. Together they would process to the wedding banquet—like a wedding reception today. And then from the banquet the whole procession would move on to the groom’s home. The function of the attendants, then as now, was to honor the bride and groom with their presence; and, in the case of the bridesmaids, to light the way for the wedding procession.

But before the groom came to meet the bride, he would negotiate with the bride’s relatives various financial details involved in the wedding transaction. Long negotiations were a sign of great respect for the bride, and brought honor to both families. So anybody who is a respectful participant in the process should expect delays. If the bridesmaids have any regard for the bride, they will be prepared for the thing to drag on all night.

In Jesus’ story the delay is a long one. All the bridesmaids grow weary with waiting and fall asleep, their lamps burning. The wise attendants have come equipped with flasks of extra oil. (Must be extra virgin olive oil, huh?) The foolish are using up the limited supply they have. At last a cry announces that the groom is near. The foolish bridesmaids suddenly realize that they are going to run short, and they panic. They ask the wise ones to share; but there isn’t enough. So they run out at midnight to buy more oil—not a likely prospect in the pre-Wal-Mart era. While they are gone the bridegroom arrives and the wise bridesmaids show the way to the wedding banquet, where the doors are closed and locked.

When at last the foolish bridesmaids catch up (we don’t know whether or not they were actually able to procure the extra oil they need) there is a painful exchange when they ask the bridegroom to admit them to the

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<sup>2</sup> This analysis comes from John Miller, author of *Step by Step Through the Parables* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981). In contrast, M. Eugene Boring, who writes on Matthew for *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, sees this story as an allegory contrived by Matthew with little grounding in actual wedding practices. Volume VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

banquet. He replies, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” That sounds rather harsh to us. But perhaps it means something like, “I have no connection with you. You are obviously not a part of this party.”

So, as we say in the trade, how does this preach? What does it mean to be prepared with enough oil to keep our lamps burning? Perhaps the best clue comes from earlier in Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says to those who wish to follow him, “You are the light of the world... let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to [God] in heaven.”

Do you see the connection? Followers of Jesus, by their good works, light the way for others to find their way to the party that is the Reign of God. Keeping our lights burning means engaging in acts of kindness, mercy and justice that illumine for others the nature and presence of God. The oil of good works lights the way.

Followers of Jesus are called to live in the here and now as citizens of the Reign of God which is to come. They bear witness to the goodness of God through the goodness of the lives they live. When the Reign of God is fully realized, the story tells us, it is too late to begin to think about living as a citizen of that reality. Such living begins now, and requires thoughtful and committed people who are determined to stick with it for the long haul.

In other words, live as though tomorrow is today. Live as though a God of forgiveness, mercy, justice and love is already in charge of our lives and our world. Let your light shine to give glory to God. Mahatma Gandhi expressed a similar thought when he said, “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

Do we want the world to be more peaceful? We are called to be peacemakers. Do we want the world to be more just? We are called to live justly. Do we want the world to be kinder? Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Our way of being in the world flows from our understanding of who God is, and from our conviction that God is already in charge.

This has nothing to do with earning our way into heaven, and everything to do with living as though we’re already there, pointing to the nature and presence of God.

So... if tomorrow is today, then today is the day to begin. One of these days... I’m going to pray when I’m not so busy. One of these days... I’ll volunteer when the kids are grown. One of these days... I’ll call to say

thank you or to ask how they're doing or to invite that person to lunch or coffee to deepen that relationship I've always intended to pursue someday. One of these days... I'll grow in my giving, become more generous, when there's more left over.

And "one of these days" never arrives. But if tomorrow is today, then now is the time to get going with that oil of living the life I intend to live, being the change I want to see to make the world more like the Reign of God for which we pray.

Tomorrow is today. And today is the day to light the way to the party that is the celebration of God's love.

Light your lamp... and keep it burning.

Amen

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