

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY NOVEMBER 12th

Reading: Matthew 25: 1 – 13 [Twenty-third (23) after Pentecost]

Perhaps mercifully, the Lectionary has taken a huge leap through a great swathe of the “Judgement Discourse” here, omitting dire and ominous sounds of the great tribulation and the passing of the age. Perhaps it will be enough if we hear the ringing tones of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.

This parable would appear to be a straight forward illustration from common life about preparedness and response. It sits amongst Matthew’s Gospel’s concluding chapters and their ominous warnings of the judgement which is to come for those refusing to accept faith in Jesus. Soon, it rings, it may be too late. Discussion continues amongst biblical commentators as to whether this story is an authentic parable of Jesus or a piece of Matthew’s own allegory paralleling events in the life of the early Christian community [see below].

Kenneth Bailey in “*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*” (pages 270-271) notes the features of this parable in common with the briefer, gentler version of the same in Luke’s Gospel [12: 35 – 38]. Both tell of a night-time incident surrounding a wedding feast which involves waiting, expectation and preparedness (for some). The image of a wedding feast was a common picture of the joy of the coming Kingdom of God. The ‘door’ is significant as it ‘shuts’ to prohibit the ones coming too late after earlier not being ready. The parables are each given their poignancy by the unknown timing of an important figure; in Matthew the groom, in Luke the ‘Master’.

There is necessary cultural background to the telling of this local tale, which Bailey comments “*fits traditional village life*”. Malina and Rohrbaugh in their “Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels” term first century marriage in Palestine ‘patrilocal’ [page 148]. A Middle-Eastern wedding would normally take place at the home of the groom, where the wife will now live and assume her place in that extended family. There people of the village would gather whilst the groom and his closest friends (today’s ‘attendants’?) would travel across town to escort his bride from her home to the ceremony. Bailey describes, “*when she was ready, she would be placed on the back of a riding animal, and the groom, with his friends would form a disorganised, exuberant parade*” [page 271 – 272]. Malina and Rohrbaugh note that “*they key moment in the long wedding celebration is thus the point at which the groom goes to the family house of the bride with his relatives to bring her back to his house*” [page 148].

These practices continue in the Middle East today. Many houses are an unfinished project, with concrete rods protruding, awaiting the construction of further rooms when the son eventually marries. I have personally witnessed just such a joyous public occasion, a long congo-line of men doing a side-on shuffle in the winding streets of the village of Cana, Galilee, in the past twenty years. “*This happy group*”, Bailey continues, “*would take the longest possible route back to the groom’s home deliberately, wandering through as many streets as possible so that most of the populace could see and cheer them as they passed*” [page 272].

Being dependent upon the bride’s preparations (then as now), there is an element of unknown timing in this ritual. In the story which Jesus tells (and note, it is a story), some of the waiting guests (female) fall asleep and, unwittingly, allow their lamps to run out of oil [we assume from the parable that it is only some of the younger women who do this; the older ones being ‘wise’ as to the waiting that a wedding ceremony may entail]. Upon announcement of the bride and groom’s coming, people would rush into the street excitedly to greet them. Except for the five unwise ones who now must scamper about to find oil to replenish their lamps. In doing so, the Parable hints, they miss the moment. The door is shut on them and they have lost the opportunity of being a part of the celebrations. At least for now, as Bailey (again) points out, “*the parable is left hanging ... We do not know what they receive when the conversation is over. In the*

Middle East the word 'no' is never an answer, rather it is a pause in the negotiations. The reader has to finish the play" [page 273].

But the details here are strange. Why does the groom take until midnight to retrieve his bride? [Eugene Boring in the "New Interpreter's Bible Commentary" notes that the thief comes at the same late hour]. Further, the common imagery of Yahweh as the bridegroom and Israel his bride, or Christ as groom and the church as bride fails in this story; the bride is never even mentioned. She never 'arrives'. On this the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary concludes, "*it seems likely that the story is an allegory constructed by Matthew to further illustrate and emphasise the theme of being ready for the coming of the Lord, despite the apparent delay*" [Commentary on Matthew, page 450].

There are many possible themes and meanings available to the reader/interpreter of this parable. In context in the time of Matthew's community some fifty to a hundred years after Christ, there is resonances of waiting the Messiah's return. Although much-anticipated in the early Christian church, Christ hasn't re-appeared and some impatience and giving up is beginning to stir amongst the people for whom the Gospel is recorded. Taken in such circumstances, the parable is a clear admonition of those who haven't stayed faithful and therefore are unable to acknowledge the Messiah when he comes. The choice of ten 'bridesmaids' or virgins in the telling, which would seem to have no other particular relevance, hints at this intent in Matthew's use, this being a common early representation of the church.

It is to be further noted that in Jewish tradition oil is a regularly-employed image for righteousness and good deeds. If this be treated seriously, then the parable becomes an exhortation to maintain acts of faith whilst awaiting the hope of Christ's coming. Not to do so, in faithless inactivity, is to fall amongst the ranks of the 'unwise'.

Bailey notes amongst his, *'the question of borrowed resources ... (people) cannot borrow their own preparations for the coming of the kingdom. Commitment and the discipleship that follows can be neither loaned nor borrowed'*. Bailey also point to the 'long haul' that the kingdom requires, noting "*there is neither instant discipleship nor instant maturation in the fullness of the kingdom.*" [page 274]

THEMES: Faithfulness, persistence, living in the meantime.
