

MATTHEW 25:1-13

ST JOHN'S, 9.30 am, 12.11.17

INTRODUCTION

In my second year at university, I shared a house with two other girls, about three miles from the university campus. I got quite fit, cycling backwards and forwards across Norwich that year!

On the first day of the first term, my friend Clare had a lecture at 9.00 am. She set off on her bike at about 8.30 am. About 10 minutes later, the heavens opened, and it started pouring with rain. At about 9.30 am, I set off to get to my first lecture at 10.00 am. I toggled up in my waterproofs, and I took a spare set of clothes to change into when I arrived.

After I'd parked my bike at the university, I went into the chaplaincy building, where I was going to get changed. There I found Clare, and another friend of ours, both looking like drowned rats! They'd not made it to their lectures; they were waiting for another friend to bring in some dry clothes for them in her car. The chaplain was highly amused when I walked in with my spare set of clothes. 'It's like the parable of the wise and foolish virgins!' was his verdict!

THE WISE AND FOOLISH VIRGINS

Let's think now about the wise and foolish girls in Jesus' parable.

What's going on here? Why are these 10 girls waiting for the bridegroom? Where's the bride?

Well, we don't know all the details of how people celebrated weddings in Jesus' time. It seems as if these 10 girls are waiting to join the bridegroom's procession, as he brings his bride home for the wedding feast. They obviously expect the procession to happen at night, because they all take a lamp, or torch, with them. There's no timetable for the festivities; they'd be going on for several days, so there's no rush. In Jesus' story, the bridegroom comes much later than expected, so the girls are kept waiting, and fall asleep.

I think the five wise girls in this story must have been Girl Guides! They were prepared for the delay, and took plenty of oil with them for their torches. The foolish girls weren't prepared, and so when the bridegroom finally arrived, they couldn't get their torches to burn properly. The torches were probably rags wrapped round sticks. When the rag was well-soaked in oil, it would burn for about 15 minutes. With no oil, it went out almost as soon as it was lit.

No oil, no torch. No torch, no procession. No procession, no party. That's what happened to the foolish girls. When the bridegroom arrived, they were off trying to buy oil for their torches. By the time they returned, they'd missed their opportunity. They were too late. The party was in full swing, but the door had been closed; no-one else could get in.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

What does all this mean? Well, if you've read Matthew's gospel before, you'll know another story about a wedding (22:1-14). Jesus makes it clear there that he's the bridegroom, and that the wedding feast is a

picture of heaven. There are other places in the New Testament where Jesus is seen as the bridegroom, the church as his bride, and the day of Jesus' return as the day of the wedding feast.

So, in this story, which doesn't mention the bride, if Jesus is the bridegroom, the 10 virgins represent Christian people, and the wedding feast represents the party in heaven at the end of time.

Jesus is saying that each and every one of us needs to be prepared for the day when he will return. It's no good leaving it 'til the last moment; if we do, like the foolish girls in his story, we'll find that we've left it too late.

I hope no-one's sitting there thinking I'm talking twaddle! Jesus is coming back; that's for certain. When he comes, he won't be the baby in the manger whose birth we'll all be celebrating in a few weeks' time. When Jesus comes back, he'll come *in a cloud with power and great glory* (Luke 21:27), and *he will separate the people one from another* (Matthew 25:32).

Like the bridegroom in the story, Jesus will come at a time we don't expect him. So we'd better make our preparations now, and make sure that we live in such a way that we're ready to receive Jesus at any moment.

Jesus may not return during your lifetime or mine - after all, many generations of Christians have already died without seeing Jesus return. But this parable still applies to them, and to us. The other thing which will happen to every one of us, except those who are alive on

earth when Jesus does return, is that we'll die. None of us knows when that will happen. Many of us have witnessed other people dying suddenly and unexpectedly, from accidents or illness. Either way, Jesus message here is just as relevant: be prepared!

So, ask yourself now, 'Am I prepared to meet Jesus when he returns?' If you're thinking, 'Well, I've been baptised', that's a good start, but it's nowhere near enough on its own. Maybe you're thinking, 'I come to church every Sunday'. Even that's not enough on its own. The bridegroom in this story didn't reject the foolish girls because they chose to stay away from his wedding. They wanted to be there and join in the celebration.

The clue to the difference between the wise and the foolish girls comes in what the bridegroom says to the foolish girls when they beg him to open the door to them. He says to them, 'I don't know you!' At another time, Jesus put it like this: *Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent* (John 17:3).

To be a Christian believer means to have a personal relationship with God. If you don't have that relationship, or you're not sure whether or not you do, may I suggest that you do something about it, *today*? It doesn't matter how often you come to church, or how many years you've been on the Church Council, or how morally good your life is. You need to be certain that you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, if you don't want to risk being shut out of his wedding feast.

Talk to a friend who you know is a believer, or talk to me. Whatever you do, 'Be on your guard'; don't get left out of the party; don't be like the foolish girls in this story.