

Reflection for Fellowship@10 12th November 2023

Text: Matthew 25:1-13 Title: Wise or Naïve?

Introduction

Let's recap.

Ten bridesmaids were waiting for a bridegroom, they waited so long that they fell asleep! This parable is familiar to you. Right? So, there were these ten bridesmaids waiting for a bridegroom. Five of the bridesmaids were wise and five of the bridesmaids were foolish we are told. The wise bridesmaids brought along some extra oil for their lamps, the foolish bridesmaids did not.

Long before the bridegroom arrived all ten of the bridesmaids fell asleep. Turns out the bridegroom doesn't know five of the bridesmaids so he shuts the door and says: *"Truly I tell you, I do not know you. Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."* What? Do you get it? I don't get it.

By the way the Greek word "parthenoi," doesn't mean bridesmaids or virgins, as so many interpretations are inclined to translate it, like we think of bridesmaids or virgins. I mean the fact that these girls haven't had sex before is not the point... RIGHT?

A "parthenoi" is simply a young woman; well, a young girl really probably about 12. So there are these 12-year-old girls who are invited to this wedding! I could tell you that a more accurate translation, would divide these girls up as 5 wise girls and 5 naïve girls.

By the way how many of you think you are wise?

Now the story takes a nasty shift, and the wise girls won't share their oil with the naïve girls and that kind of goes against the grain of our understanding of the gospel, because aren't we supposed to share with those in need?

Then there's the bridegroom; I could do what most preachers do and tell you that the bridegroom is really Jesus, who shows up late to his own wedding, only to discover that half the wedding party is unprepared and so, he simply denies that he even knows them and then shuts the door and leaves them out there in the darkness. But where's the good news in that? What happened to GOD's grace! I mean after all, the bridegroom was late. Is the penalty for being naïve really eternal damnation?

Well, if that's true then heaven help those who are naïve. God save us all from naïveté!
Let's all be wise virgins!

Are there any biblical literalists among us?

By the way we are meant to take the Bible seriously, not literally.

Now the usual interpretation of this story is: "Be prepared. Jesus is coming any minute, so be ready for the rapture." So the theme is waiting, being ready. But wait. If you do not believe in the rapture and I know most of you don't, then how does one make sense of this parable? And who wants to be a wise virgin?

For years and years, generation upon generation, people have been telling this one, and leaving people hanging with this confusing story with a warning about the need to be prepared. Liturgically it makes sense to focus on the imminent coming of Christ, since we're approaching Reign of Christ Sunday, and Advent. Jesus is coming. Be prepared. Be wise. Be ready. So come to the marriage feast of the Lamb...

But all of this is post-Jesus interpretation, arising in a community that had expected Jesus' return, but after 50 years he still hadn't. There was some anxiety about how long they had to wait. That's Matthew's concern, but not Jesus'.

Now this morning I want to use different lenses to illuminate this parable. Maybe give us some fresh insights on the parable.

First, this calls us to confess *the politics of patriarchy* in the text. What do I mean? You and I know that the Bible is written by men, from the perspective of men and for primary for men. This morning I want to invite you to *a subversive reading* of the narratives of the parables from invisible, underrepresented, colonised, and decolonised communities. And I sincerely believe that *the politics of representation* must also be addressed in any hermeneutical engagement with Biblical texts, and this parable of the ten women challenges us towards that.

Second, this is a parable of ten unnamed women. Most translations have recorded the women in this parable as virgins, some others as bridesmaids. However, *the politics of representation* challenges us not to define anyone's identity by their role, status, or occupation.

For example, caste systems in India and elsewhere have operated on the notions of purity and pollution, for people are divided into dominant castes and outcastes based on descent and occupation. I am sure you good people would agree that to recognise people as people, irrespective of their roles, statuses, gender, race or orientations or occupations is an important marker for a just and equitable society.

This parable, then, is a recognition of the fact that the divine in Jesus communicates the eschatological message of final judgment through these unnamed, underrepresented, and unduly presented women, whom Christians, from the first century until our own, think are incapable of being the bearers of the Gospel.

You understand what I have just said? For me this parable of the ten unnamed women, therefore, is an affirmation of the strength of women as bearers, instruments, agencies, and resources of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Third, this parable is about keeping us awake and waiting in hope on God, for none of us knows the day nor the hour of the Son of Man's return (verse 13). This parable is a wakeup call to any of us who have fallen into the deep slumber of falsehood, seduced by the false saviours of modernity. Seduced by the creeds of modernity: greed is good, acquire power at cost, the ends justify the means, peace through violence. Today, secularism, the market, globalisation, the state, etc. have been sedating communities with their false hopes and even obstructing the encounters with the divine.

This parable, along with the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats that follows shortly after it, invites us to recognise that the divine in Christ has been visiting us daily at odd hours in different forms: in the hungry, the homeless, the naked, the imprisoned, etc. We have been busy going around to trim our lanterns and meeting market dealers, missing opportunities to meet and eat with the divine. This parable of ten women is challenging us to stay awake to recognise God who in Christ is coming to us in unexpected people, in unexpected ways, inviting to meet and dine with them. We must stay awake by waiting on God's hope. The message that reverberates from this parable is to be prepared for the visitation of the divine in our localities.

Finally, this parable of ten women develops *a theology of unpredictability*, for no one knows the day nor the hour of the return of the Son of Man. This parable contests all kinds of predictions of God's action, calling us to recognise that God does not act on the terms and conditions of human predictions. And yet there are Christians today who still think they know.

Since the conflicts started between Israel and Palestine Christian fundamentalists everywhere are beating the drums of the second coming of Christ is imminent. I don't know when we are going to learn, that God acts on God's own terms and times. **Unpredictability** is an important theological category; I know not comfortable for many.

The God of the Bible has always chosen to be a God associated with calling people, sending people, encountering people, incarnating as human and is present with communities who are on the margins, all of this happening in the fullness of God's own time. God in Christ has been returning in the unpredictability of our times, for the call is to keep awake and be prepared to meet God at God's time and God's place, which confound human predictions and expectations.

We know in our hearts that Christ returns repeatedly, each and every day if we are not seduced by the false saviours of modernity. We have seen Christ in the faces of our sisters and brothers. We have been Christs to one another. For truly I tell you, said Jesus, *"Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me"*. They are members of God's kin-dom - the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger from another land, the naked, the sick or the imprisoned.

We strive to be the LOVE that is God in the world. LOVE isn't always nice, or pretty, or for that matter joyful. Encountering the LOVE that we call God is a daunting, challenging, awesome thing. Striving to be LOVE in the world is not for the faint hearted. Those who seek to follow the way of Jesus of Nazareth will be seen as fools. The world might think they are naive – leaders are servants, loving your enemies, doing good to those who hate you.

In the kin-dom of God, humility is exalted, the first shall be last, offenders are forgiven 70 times 7, and ethnic outsiders kneel to help half dead strangers lying in a ditch.

The kin-dom of God is countercultural. It is upside-down and inside-out — a kin-dom, where weakness is power, power is weakness, and suffering can lead to glory.

If we truly follow Jesus not just emulate him, we will land in the middle of the world: right into all the mess of living, right into the ugliness of all the politics, right into the fears that haunt us, the disasters that threaten us, and the needs of all those who cry out for LOVE. It won't always be pretty. It certainly won't be easy. It definitely won't always be where we would choose to go. But it will certainly awaken us to all that we are created to be.

Are your eyes open? Are you prepared? Let us see visions of what can be. Let us dream dreams. Visions and dreams imagined in this century. Let our vision be big enough and audacious enough to meet the challenges of being LOVE in the world. Dreams and Visions worthy of the MYSTERY that IS the LOVE we call God. This dear sisters and brothers is the Gospel of Christ.

Recently I came across the reverse prayer of St Francis. More scary, more powerful, more uncomfortable: Are you ready for the challenge?

*“Lord, make me a channel of disturbance.
Where there is apathy, let me provoke;
Where there is compliance, let me bring
questioning;
Where there is silence, may I be a voice.*

*Where there is too much comfort
and too little action, grant disruption;
Where there are doors closed and hearts
locked,
Grant the willingness to listen.*

*When laws dictate and pain is
overlooked...
When tradition speaks louder than need...
Grant that I may seek rather
to do justice than to talk about it;*

*Disturb us, O Lord.
To be with, as well as for, the alienated;
To love the unlovable as well as the lovely;
Lord, make me a channel of disturbance.
AMEN.”*