Matthew | Into the dark

Fellowship@10, 8 November 2026

Alison Sampson ~ Matthew 25:1-13

Come on, girls, you've been working since dawn and it's only midnight—how dare you sleep? Wake up! Be alert, bright as a button; anticipate your master's every need. You have more oil? Don't you dare share, you know it's a limited good. And stop fretting about your foolish sisters turned away from the banquet.

Nobody likes a moaning Myrtle: so put a smile on your dial! And as for you who failed to please: now you'll get it. You'll be locked out. Just sleep on the step like the Levite's concubine, let's see what happens to you …

I don't know about you, but the story of the ten bridesmaids doesn't sound like good news to me. Women expected to serve at all hours, and anticipate their master's every need. Women set against each other, unable to share what they have. Women rejected from the house or realm, forced to wander unprotected in the dark. Women humiliated for the sake of a story told for an audience of blokes. For someone in a woman's body, someone like me, it's much less heaven and more the crushing weight of some patriarchal vision of hell.

How we hear stories depends so much on our social location. Those of us who are assured from the beginning that we belong are like, Of course, yeah, gotta be ready! And so we hear this story as a Boy Scout lesson about what it takes to get into heaven. We might feel it's a shame about the foolish bridesmaids but the truth is, some things can't be shared. Anyway, we all know the motto: Be prepared! Then we read ahead to the sheep and the goats and find ourselves some sick hungry homeless people, in order to earn our service badge and win the approval of our scoutmaster-king.

But those of us who are less assured hear the story differently. Those of us who have been told that we do not really belong because of our class, our questions, our gender or our desire; those of us who are always treated like outsiders or second-best; those of us who are endlessly late and disorganised because we're disabled or addicted or neurodivergent or maybe we lost our money for oil at the pokies or are wrangling three scrappy kids: what does the typical reading say to us? That in our weakness, our foolishness and our

failure God will slam the door shut in our faces and we'll be left outside in the dark. And I wonder, is this the God we worship, and what the kingdom of heaven is really like?

I don't think so, no. So this bible nerd went back to the Greek, and the very first thing I noticed is the introduction to the story. According to most translations, Jesus says, 'The kingdom of heaven will be like this.' It seems black and white; case closed. But when you check out the Greek, it says something slightly different: 'The kingdom of heaven will be likened to this.' Just a little nuance, that future passive voice, but straightaway this raises a question: Who will liken the kingdom of heaven to this story? Jesus, or other people?

The community who first heard it expected the Messiah would come to earth like a bridegroom returning to his bride, and so they told many stories anticipating a heavenly wedding banquet. Yet they also lived in a world where political marriages were important business. They involved intense negotiations, formal treaties, and the consolidation of power, with not a whiff of love. And so, I wonder, is Jesus using and subverting the messianic marriage metaphor to tell a different story?

We see a hint of this in Matthew 22. There, too, we find a wedding banquet: this time, for the son of a great king. Most people assume the son is Jesus, the king is God, and that it's all a metaphor for heaven. But what happens is this. Ostensibly, everyone is invited to a celebration, but really they're being ordered to witness the marriage of two powers. Those who don't turn up are murdered by the enraged and humiliated king; and the man who comes but refuses to wear festive clothing is thrown into outer darkness.

Now, if we believe that God is easily enraged and humiliated, and loves nothing better than wholesale slaughter, then we will read it as a story of heaven: so you better get yourself an invite, and turn up, and wear the right clothes—or there'll be hell to pay!

But if, with the Psalmist, we trust in a God who is 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Psalm 86:15), then the king doesn't look like God and the story isn't about heaven at all. Instead, it's a story of the world, and the Christ figure can only be the shabbily dressed man who, like Jesus in the face of his accusers, is silent and bound, then thrown into the darkness of hell. In other words, the kingdom of

heaven is such that those who perform its truth against power will suffer, just like Jesus.

Bringing a similar curiosity to the story of the ten bridesmaids, we find that the kingdom of heaven will be likened to a story where five goody-two-shoes are chosen, the compliant five who have the training, foresight, resource, and health to be prepared at all times, while the five kinda hopeless ones are locked out and left in the dark. I suggest that the bridegroom here doesn't look much like the man who aligns himself with the poor, the vulnerable, the sick, the foreigner, the humiliated and the outcast, that is, the man we know as Jesus; and so the story isn't about heaven at all. Instead, it's an observation about how some people think of the kingdom and present it to others.

And who might those people be? There's a pretty solid clue in Matthew 23. 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!' says Jesus, 'for you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven, and do not go in yourselves.' (v. 13). It's no coincidence that Matthew is writing for Jewish followers of Jesus who had been expelled from the synagogues of Galilee: they knew the pain of being locked out.

It explains why, in Matthew's account, Jesus critiques religious leaders who block people from heaven, the sort of leaders who place heavy burdens on people, tell sniggering stories about virgins, and love nothing better than to sort. And, says Jesus, those leaders will liken the kingdom of heaven to yet another sorting mechanism: Wise / foolish. At other times, they use insider / outsider. Righteous / sinner. Jew / Gentile. Conservative / progressive. Patriot / traitor. Our way or the highway: because we have a monopoly on the truth.

But we don't follow such leaders. Instead, we follow the one who was weighed up by them and found wanting, who was in fact sorted out. Betrayed, judged and rejected, he was condemned, dragged outside the city gates, and crucified on the highway. Then his body was placed in a tomb with a great stone blocking the doorway; for a moment, it seemed that violence had won.

Yet when he had breathed his last, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51): the barrier between the sacred and the profane, God's holy place and people's ordinary lives, was no more. And three days later, women witness another barrier, the door to the tomb, blown wide open. Death has been conquered, all our sorting has come to naught, and the Risen Christ is on the loose.

‘Ask,’ says Jesus, ‘and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.’ (Matthew 7:7-8). No exceptions. For the wise, the foolish and everyone in between, the door will be opened. For the curtain hangs in tatters, God is in the world, and we will find Christ among foolish bridesmaids and foreigners, freaks, failures and other losers, laughing in boundless joy.

There is feeding and healing, reconciling, forgiving. Stories are being shared, bread is being broken, wine is being poured, and there is grilled fresh fish in abundance: for Christ is bringing everyone together at a gloriously open and generous banquet.

If you find this image offensive, this idea that Jesus is among the foolish bridesmaids, then perhaps he might ask, ‘Are you envious because I am generous?’ (Matthew 20:15).

If, on the other hand, you’re feeling a little bit left out, never fear: there’s an invitation with your name on it. Just knock, and ask for the door to be opened. When it swings wide, all you need do is step over the threshold then out, into the dark. Ω

Reflect:

- Who or what is this reading for or against?
- Do you live comfortably assured of your own salvation? Or do you seek to earn the approval of the scoutmaster-king?
- Where do you feel most at ease? Safe in the house with the well-prepared bridesmaids, or out in the world at a chaotic picnic?
- What is God inviting you to now?