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Wedding Mayhem (Matthew 25: 1-13)

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I didn't realise so many of you read the back of the service sheet! Last week, we advertised this week's reflection by the title 'Wedding Mayhem'. That came about because Neil wanted to print a title, I said I didn't know what I'd be talking about but we'd be reading the parable of the ten bridesmaids. Neil proposed 'Wedding Mayhem'. I agreed because I thought no one would notice, and that I could always adjust course! Well – since then, numbers of you have expressed excitement about what might be coming – will there be a wedding? will there be mayhem? The pressure has been on! It's true to say, of course, that any wedding party with ten bridesmaids does sound like a recipe for mayhem. In my experience of both waitressing at and conducting weddings, two or three are quite sufficient to cause considerable stress in the make-up and transport departments. But *that* observation is perhaps slightly beside the point as we turn our attention to our gospel passage.

At one level, it seems clear enough what this story's about. It's part of a final sequence of parables in Matthew's gospel to do with the 'end times', and the question of how to live faithfully, how to anticipate and help realise Christ's promised future. If the bridegroom is a Messianic image, and the wedding banquet an icon of the kingdom of God, then this is a story about being prepared, being equipped to wait on Christ faithfully and expectantly over time, and so fit to welcome him and share in the feast to come.

As seems so often the case in Matthew, however, there are troubling apocalyptic elements. I'm thinking in particular of the refusal of the bridegroom to let in the tardy ones, and the refusal of the five wise bridesmaids to share their lamp oil with the

foolish. Traditional interpretations of these elements can be uncomfortably moralistic – the five who are ‘prepared’ deserve the reward of their preparation; after all, the foolish had just as much opportunity to be ready as their fellows, and the bridegroom deserves to have his way properly lit by those responsible for his reception. On this kind of reading, by analogy, commentators imply that there are ‘good’ Christians who take seriously their duties as ‘bridesmaids’, and then there are a bunch of foolish free-loaders who hope to sneak in off the back of the prudent provision of their peers – but the Lord won’t be fooled, and the door will be locked against them. They will say ‘Lord, Lord’, and he will deny knowing them. The take home message – you lot had better get your act together.

The problem I have with this miserly, moralistic reading is that it doesn’t seem to square with the whole trend of the gospel story. The ‘prodigal’ younger son didn’t deserve the fatted calf, but was given it anyway; the labourers who came late to the vineyard didn’t deserve a full day’s wage, but received it all the same. What makes this a different kind of case?

An important bit of context is the early church’s slow realization that the bridegroom, the Christ, is in some sense ‘delayed’. New life has broken in, but rather than the consummation of all things coming quickly as was perhaps initially expected, this new life is now understood to involve duration. And this means, Matthew is indicating, that Christian life is about the long haul, ensuring we are sufficiently resourced by the Spirit (remembering that ‘oil’ is an image of the Spirit) to keep persevering in receptivity, to remain open to the kingdom coming towards us.

But what about the meanness of the wise bridesmaids? Why won’t they share their resources with the others? Heather told me during the week that she’d once preached on this passage, taking as her theme a resolution she’d made to stop ‘running on empty’. In the first instance, this was about giving up her tendency to scream around Canberra, transporting three teenaged boys in a car with its petrol gauge all too often

on empty. But it was also, more generally, about recognizing the ways she herself tended to 'run on empty' or at least dangerously low on fuel – what with busyness, tiredness, lack of space. What's more she'd realised there was a sense in which only she could know when she was on that brink, only she could be responsible for how she was travelling and for topping up.

And I wonder, if this could be part of what Matthew's getting at in this story? When it comes to meeting the bridegroom and being available for life in God, is there a necessary preparedness that we cannot simply borrow from anyone else? One commentator has written that the image of oil for the lamps can be interpreted as an inner disposition that makes one alert for the presence of the kingdom when that presence occurs. In a similar vein, the image of oil could be interpreted as a certain quality of receptivity or depth of yearning. If that's so, then it makes sense that to cultivate this disposition, receptivity or yearning is an inescapably personal work – unless we take responsibility, no one else can do it for us.

Well, I think there's something true in this – but also something that leaves me still slightly uneasy. I'll start with what I think is true. There are things in the spiritual life we can only do for ourselves. Only I, for example, can become reconciled to my past, only I can come to *self*-acceptance, only I can give my heart to God ... All this requires *our* consent, our being awake, our yielding to the work of grace in us – and if this is what meeting God face to face involves, then we are foolish indeed to neglect these duties.

At the same time, I wonder what was really going on for those foolish bridesmaids. What had them behave *that* way? It seems to me that our capacity even to embark on this spiritual work, this deepening of our receptivity to God, may be affected by things not entirely under our control. How we've been formed from childhood, for example, the extent of our wounds and their impact on our sense of self and our freedom to trust. It may be affected too by the circumstances of our lives – whether we're ill, anxious or exhausted, whether we're surrounded by noise, or caring for people

with high needs, homeless or on Manus Island, exploited or being abused. People in these situations can certainly pray, reflect, yearn for Christ's coming – probably more so than those of us more comfortable. Yet, it can feel a lot harder, more tempting to give up; there can be more to get past – struggles with anger and bitterness, with self-loathing and shame. And this, I think, is where we *can*, where we must help each other. We can notice when another's light is flickering, when they are running close to empty. We can encourage one another, help create space, security and confidence for one another. We can share our flask of oil.

It is true that there's a necessarily personal dimension in our spiritual journeys and in the work of our transformation. The parables of judgement speak to us of the urgency and seriousness of God's invitation to each one of us – wake up, pay attention, be alert to the state of your soul and your readiness to welcome – we cannot finally outsource these responsibilities. And yet, one of the loveliest aspects of the Catholic communion liturgy is the prayer: 'look not on our sins but on the faith of your church'. We're in this together – and sometimes, when it feels as though our capacity to wait well or to respond is limited or even extinguished, we must be able to ask for help, to entrust ourselves to be carried awhile by our friends in Christ, our fellow bridesmaids. For these parables of judgement are embedded in a much larger story about a feast in preparation to which all of us have been invited by one who lets himself be killed to make known God's unkillable mercy and grace.

That suggests that if some of us find ourselves, from time to time, with a bit extra oil for our lamps, then ... be willing to share, be generous. Let's make it a big party, wedding mayhem!