

**Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost (Matthew 25. 1-13)**

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We are coming towards the end of the church's year, and so towards the end of the Matthew's account of Jesus' teaching ministry. Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the last time and tension with the authorities is building; the story starts to feel darker and more ominous. Jesus himself seems intent on provoking crisis – disputing with and offending the scribes and Pharisees, turning over tables in the temple – indeed prophesying the overthrow of the temple itself, as well as the persecution of his disciples and the judgement of God. Then Jesus goes out of the temple to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples come to him privately asking about these things: 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' Jesus warns about false prophets and false readings of the times. And then follows a series of parables concerning how to 'be', how to live in this ambiguous time, when the old order is collapsing and the new is not yet come, its shape not yet obvious.

Making use of different metaphors and allegories, these stories share striking themes in common. There's the theme of delay and absence – the bridegroom is delayed, the master of the house has gone away on a journey – and meanwhile, the bridesmaids or the householders are entrusted with a task. There's the theme of unknowing – the length of the delay is unspecified, and so there's also talk of the necessity for watchfulness, since the master's return will be unexpected. 'About that day and hour no one knows', says Jesus, except for the Father. And finally there's the theme of accountability and judgement. When the master returns, accounts will be reckoned for the use of the time and of the master's resources, for the treatment of others, and for the readiness to welcome the master home.

All of these stories suggest a profound future orientation for the life of Christian discipleship – something is coming towards us, and we need to be ready and doing the right thing when it finally arrives. Except that's not quite it. Because the 'something' that is coming towards us is already here. In the final teaching in this sequence, we have the extraordinary story of the last judgement – imagined as the 'Son of Man' coming in glory, calling the nations before him, and judging people according to whether they have 'fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick or visited those in prison'. Insofar as they have done that, the righteous are told, they have done it *already* to the returning master. 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these ... you did it to me' (Matt. 25. 40).

So this suggests that the 'future orientation' of Christian discipleship is not so much about filling the time until something else happens – being good and looking busy because Jesus is coming. Rather, it's more about a particular quality of being in the present. In Christ – the shape of God's future and our own fullest life is already here, present and active. In this sense, although God's kingdom is not yet fully realised among us, there will be no surprises in the coming judgement. Yet the question remains: how do we dispose ourselves, now? How do we participate fully in this time, bringing about a world where God's will is truly done?

In the parable of the ten bridesmaids, we discern some clues. It's about waiting, not on our terms, but on God's. It's about cultivating our capacity to be there in the long haul – with oil in our lamps. It involves being awake and paying attention, noticing when something is being called forth and then desiring, daring to go out to meet it. It means trusting that the promised bridegroom, the grace of God, will actually come. In traditional theological terms, this quality of being, this stance of attentive receptivity and faithful expectancy, is called 'hope'.

How does this way of being make a difference? How does it enable the fuller realisation of Christ's way – in us and through us? This seems to me a mysterious thing – difficult to articulate and yet very important.

As I experience it, hope involves discovering the capacity to hold open the space of possibility, in the face of all that contradicts it. It's a vulnerable and open posture between presumption and despair. I stumbled into this experience in my own life at a time when nothing (or very little) was going as I planned or wanted it to be, and I'd run out of energy for trying to force a different outcome. I teetered on the edge of giving up but then, one morning, I woke with the words of Mary in my head: 'Let it be with me according to your word'.

Suddenly I found myself able to wait ... even excited to wait – and it was God's terms now, not mine. The oil in my lamp was the practice of contemplative prayer. Nothing changed outwardly for quite a while, but I felt a profound shift in the quality of my being. I was no longer living inside a closed system – a system defined by me and what I could or couldn't generate. Whether or not I was going to get what I thought I wanted, I was living into a larger reality – the reality of possibility, of grace coming towards me. Of course, there was the temptation to panic and try to get things back under my control; of course, there was doubt that anything was happening. But deeper still ... a new certainty, a different kind of awareness, a sense that the waiting itself had traction, that it was achieving something – in me, but also bigger than me. At that time, it was the way I was participating in the coming of the kingdom, in the fulfilment of the promise, somehow helping to bring it about.

Hope is not wishful thinking and not the blithe optimism that things will turn out – but a new way of experiencing the present, with all its hardships, in the key of the future. This is why hope is powerful – and learning to live in the power of hope is the invitation and task of discipleship. And notice again where the teaching on this way of living comes in the gospel story. Jesus is about to be handed over to be killed, leaving his disciples radically vulnerable in a hostile and death-dealing world. He gives them, not a strategic plan for communicating the good news or managing the coming persecutions – no critical performance indicators, but an invitation to a way of being – expectant, vulnerable, patient. This way of being is challenging – it's

counter-intuitive. When things are difficult or uncertain, the temptation is always to circle the wagons, to defend ourselves against vulnerability, or to take things into our own hands, and 'help' God along. So it requires a willingness to trust God and God's timing – to 'hope against hope' as St Paul puts it.

The wise and foolish bridesmaids represent two ways of being in our unresolved present. One, the foolish way, is to approach it on our terms – one flask of oil, that should be enough. The second, the wise way, is to give myself to waiting as a spiritual task and joy. It's a call and an invitation; anticipation that becomes participation – and, in its own mysterious way, necessary for the fulfilment of God's promise, for the fullness of grace.