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### **Ready or Not (Matthew 25. 1-13)**

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Years ago, I remember going to a traditional Anglican service at the church I regularly attended. During the week just prior to that Sunday, a much loved member of our congregation had died after a long illness. We were grieving her loss deeply which was made even more poignant by the fact that her husband was there among us, in the pew they had usually sat in together, now on his own. The liturgy got underway, and within moments we were proclaiming the Gloria, as we did every week: 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth'.

I found it incredibly moving. At one level, it felt almost wrong in the face of the grief among us. How could we just carry on with our familiar liturgy as if nothing had changed? Yet at another level, it felt profoundly comforting and true. It was our corporate expression of the faith that, though our lives come and go, God is eternal; and that, as St Paul put it, 'whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's'. Our friend had died. Yet that Sunday, as every Sunday, we turned our faces to God and proclaimed the gift of our redemption: 'we worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory'.

This week, I have found myself wrestling some of the same feelings, the same sense of disjunction. The horror of the bombardment of Gaza goes on, with stories emerging of ever increasing desperation. There are reports of thousands killed, including over 4000 children; tens of thousands are fleeing, terrified, without access to food, water, fuel and medical care, let alone any promise of a future. The World Health Organisation warns the risk of disease is escalating rapidly, exacerbated by intense overcrowding and disrupted health, water, and sanitation systems. Israeli hostages, some of them children, continue to be held by Hamas. Israeli mothers along with Palestinian mothers plead for a cease-fire, plead for peace, and all the

while atrocities are committed and we look helplessly on at trauma being layered upon trauma, generation after generation, so that it's hard to imagine how the cycle of violence may ever be broken.

Yet here we gather as usual, tapped into the recurring cycle of the church's year, replaying stories some of us have heard many times before. How can we just carry on? Are we living in a parallel universe? How does this connect, *does* this connect, with that?

Liturgically, we're coming to the end of this year's focus on the gospel of Matthew. Our readings for the next three weeks have to do with the question of how to live and how to persevere faithfully in a world where, though the peace of Christ is said to have dawned, it is manifestly not yet realised, not yet triumphant or even all that obvious. So maybe, there is a kind of connection after all.

Today's parable is one in series of four. All are oriented to the future. Some consummation is awaited, and the fact it hasn't happened yet is narrated in terms of delay. The bridegroom is delayed, the master of the house has gone away, gone on a journey and is slow to return. But it could be any minute now. Those who are wise live in active expectation his coming for, as Jesus says, 'you know neither the day nor the hour' (Matthew 25.13).

There seems to have been an expectation in the earliest Christian communities, that Jesus would return sooner rather than later to implement decisively God's new regime, the new form of life he had promised. Some of Jesus' own words seem to have implied this: 'Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power' (Mark 9.1). And this was certainly an expectation expressed by some of the earliest more apocalyptic New Testament texts. But the 'return' did not occur.

Accordingly, some have argued that stories like today's reading were told to make sense of the non-appearance. The notion of 'delay' rationalises disappointment while also allowing for the indefinite postponement of a second coming. If no one knows the day nor the hour, then no one can say the promise is

unfulfilled. Meanwhile, disciples are enjoined to ‘keep calm and carry on’. Ultimately you will receive your reward. As James Alison has pointed out, however, from a Christian perspective, there’s a major problem with this interpretation.<sup>1</sup> It suggests that the apostolic witness is operating a bit like those millenarian sects that need to rationalise their miscalculation of the timing of the end of the world. And this suggests bad faith, the refusal to acknowledge that they, perhaps even Jesus himself, just got it wrong. Is that what’s going on?

Alison shows there is undeniably a ‘development’ in the way the New Testament texts reflect on notions such as ‘the coming, the day, the delay, and so on’. There were almost certainly people who did expect Jesus’ imminent return in glory and ‘who were, at the very least, confused by the delay which they were experiencing’.<sup>2</sup> However, he writes, all this is susceptible of a more interesting interpretation, than the one that’s premised on ‘bad faith’.

In a nutshell, he argues that rather than the language of ‘delay’ rationalising the non-fulfilment of promise, we can see slowly unfolding in these texts the realisation that God’s new regime is not going to be established once and for all by a returning conqueror, trailing clouds of glory as he comes to inflict vengeance on the wicked. Rather, it will be brought about from within the world, as humanity learns what it means to live in accordance with the truth of things revealed by Christ, and empowered to do this by the grace he gives. On this account, the ‘delay’ is not about waiting for something else to happen. It’s about learning to inhabit the time given to us – a time when the ultimate meaning of things is already revealed, but isn’t yet realised; a time for learning to participate in and be accountable to that truth – or not.

What does *that* life look like? That faithfulness? Each of the four parables expresses an aspect of it. One emphasises how we’re to treat our fellow householders when ‘the Master’ is away (Matthew 24. 45-51); next week’s parable

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<sup>1</sup> James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publications, 1996), p.119.

<sup>2</sup> Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.123.

of the talents speaks of how to use the gifts entrusted to us, and the parable of judgement in the week after focuses on how we must treat the most vulnerable, those who are hungry and thirsty, sick or imprisoned, poor and far from home. This week's parable of the ten bridesmaids seems to speak of our capacity to be faithful over the long haul, capable of responding to the call of the bridegroom when we're called upon to do so.

It's interesting, I think, that for all the insistence in these stories about the necessity for watchfulness and keeping awake, none of the ten bridesmaids seem particularly hypervigilant. 'As the bridegroom was delayed', says the text, 'all of them became drowsy and slept'. So the difference between those deemed foolish and those deemed wise wasn't to do with whether they nodded off. It was that when the call came, 'at midnight' (the unexpected hour), only some had the wherewithal to respond.

There's a moralistic reading of this story, which portrays the wise bridesmaids like boy scouts, over-prepared with their extra flasks of oil and, like the goody two-shoes they are, withholding their reserves from their flakier friends. But remember that oil is an image of the Holy Spirit. And I wonder if this story is suggesting that when it comes to accessing the power of the Spirit, there's a sense in which we cannot simply borrow its resource from someone else at will? The idea perhaps is that having spiritual capacity when we need it requires us to take some responsibility for obtaining it. If we don't do this, the parable suggests, we render ourselves unavailable to participate in the consummation of God's future when the action gets underway. We may look like we're in the wedding party, and we *are* part of it to a point. But when it comes down to it, if we haven't done the necessary 'work' we will have rendered ourselves strangers to the bridegroom.

The gospels present us with a vision of the reign of God, a world in which justice is done and the wedding feast prepared. As we know all too clearly and painfully, that vision is not fulfilled, that world is not ours. And the difficult truth. No one is coming; no one is going to crash in from outside to save us from ourselves.

Christians proclaim that Christ has come. He is the revelation of God's meaning in the form of a human life. He has bestowed upon us the power of his Spirit to participate in the realisation of God's goodness. We proclaim too that Christ will come again – that his redeeming love will be the last Word, the criterion by which all our lives will be judged and our deeds measured. But heaven on earth, the consummation of the possibilities we've been offered? That depends on how we inhabit the time. It depends on our willingness to participate in its realisation.

And so, Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth.