

Parable 8 – The 10 bridesmaids  
Matthew 25 v 1-13  
Ephesians 1 v3-14 – Proper 10  
13.8.2006 St. Mary's, Banbury

The Bride's late! It is something of a tradition – the traffic, last minute nerves, a popped zip in one case and so the bridesmaids stand outside church waiting, and waiting and probably shivering and clasping their flowers. Unlike in our parable today, they don't carry lamps, for surely the bride will arrive before dark..... and actually if she arrives after about 5.30pm we'll have to postpone till tomorrow anyway for marriages can only be conducted between the hours of 8am and 6pm!

Today's picture doesn't make a lot of sense in the context of 21<sup>st</sup> century weddings. But things were different in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. We're used to the groom and all the guests being in church before the time the wedding is due to start. Then we have the grand arrival of the bride and her bridesmaids. We close the doors at the back but if a

few guests are late they slip in quietly and hope they haven't missed too much.

Very different in Jesus time. The bride and the bridesmaids and indeed everyone except the groom got themselves ready for the wedding. The bridesmaids processed down the road, possibly playing instruments and singing and joined the bride and then they waited and waited and waited for the arrival of the groom. It could be hours or even days or even a fortnight! The bridegroom comes when he comes and it may indeed be in the middle of the night. Custom has it that he does have the courtesy to send a servant ahead to shout out "Behold, the Bridegroom is coming" and the rest of the bridal party is expected to jump up and go out to meet him. If it is dark they need to light their lamps promptly for no one is allowed onto the streets without a lighted lamp. Then, having greeted the bridegroom and gone into the place of the wedding, the door is shut and sorry, late-comers have

missed their chance – no one is admitted after the door is shut.

So it was into this cultural context that Jesus told the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. The ten bridesmaids ready and waiting for the arrival of the groom. Evening fell and they lit their lamps and still he did not come and they became drowsy and fell asleep and their lamps went out. Then suddenly the shout “Behold the bridegroom” and they wake with a start.

And it is this moment our window captures. It is dark – we see again the red sky which our craftsmen have repeatedly used to indicate night-time. The lamps of the bridesmaids are quickly trimmed and lit. The girls wipe the sleep from their eyes, shake out the creases from their clothes and they are ready – but only some – only 5. And this one at the back certainly looks a bit bleary around the eyes. The other 5 have no spare supplies of oil so they can’t light their lamps. They can’t go out to meet the

bridegroom, they will be shut out of the wedding feast. You can see the desperation on their faces; the beseeching gesture in the outstretched arm of the first of this second group. Indeed one head bowed, possibly in tears, as she realises the enormity of the situation.

“Give us some of your oil, they beg the others.” But this is not a time for sharing, “We have only just enough for ourselves – go and buy some.” I don’t suppose the oil dealer was over quick at opening up in the small hours of the night and by the time the foolish five returned the door to the wedding feast was shut. And despite their pleas, the door was not opened.

It is a harsh tale and does not sit comfortably with the Christian spirit of kindness, love and generosity to others, especially those in need. But it isn’t a parable about sharing. It is a parable of warning.

But warning about what? We've traditionally taken this parable as a warning to be ready for the return of Jesus. A not unreasonable interpretation – indeed Jesus at times refers to himself as the bridegroom and the church as his bride. We would normally hear this passage read in church in early November, a couple of weeks before the start of Advent – the season when our focus is on the coming of Jesus; both his first coming and his second coming. The window illustrator has made a link to this time of year by making the background pattern of the window that of horse chestnut leaves with fully developed conkers very evident.

At the time the parable was written down in St Matthew's gospel the Christian Church was facing up to the fact that Jesus hadn't returned as quickly as they had hoped he would and they were settling themselves down for a bit of a wait, and we continue to wait. (Indeed it is surprising 2000 years on that there are any oil supplies left for any of us).

But when Jesus actually told this parable – he was obviously with his listeners. And the event or events he was warning them about were probably not that of his long delay in coming back but, rather, the warning was likely to be about the coming times; the events He, Jesus, and they were about to face sometimes referred to as “The Crisis of the Kingdom” (Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*”, page 75ff). By this crisis we mean not just the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus (and of course during this we do find the disciples caught napping whilst Jesus prays in Gethsemane), but also the coming the political crisis for the Jews with the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple and for the early Christians the start of persecutions – all at the hands of the Roman empire.

Times coming soon would be tough. Had they enough reserves to face and cope with them? And times continue to be tough – a quick look around the world and we see Christians facing all kinds of troubles, testing times and

persecutions – in Palestine, Lebanon and Israel, in almost any country where Christians are a minority religion and even in the so called- Christian west – the challenge to live a Christian life-style and not be caught napping is tough. We are surrounded by temptation after temptation from sheer apathy to moral decline.

In talking to a family this week they commented on how they surprised they had been in watching the TV programme – “The Convent”. The programme followed 4 women as they entered a convent for 8 weeks – some with some Christian faith, others with none. The surprise was, that despite being in an enclosed convent, the nuns were very much up to speed about modern life and its pressures and were able to listen to the women who had brought innumerable issues with them into their retreat. They were able to meet the women where they were, listen attentively to them and offer very wise counsel and support . How? Because their deep-seated regular life of prayer and contemplation had brought them close to the heart of God

and they were able to be channels of His wisdom. Their lamps were trimmed and burning and the wells of oil reserves ran deep. Not something you can refill to that depth overnight.

We need similar reserves to enable our lamps to keep shining, ideally until the Lord returns or when we meet him at the end of our days. But in the meantime we need to keep our lamps trimmed and burning bright to enable us to face the crisis, the challenges and the troubles of the current age.

May God today, in this service and in our walk with him through the rest of this day, fill our lamps and the reserve flagons so we are ready to face all that this week brings.