

# PARABLE OF THE TEN BRIDESMAIDS

**Matthew 25:1-13**

Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> November 2017

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In the manse in Blacktown where I live with my wife, Laurel, there is actually four of us sharing the space as my daughter and my son-in-law also reside with us. But I would be forgetting something quite important if I were to stop here. For we have a fifth family member living with us and this is our black, female, ragdoll 'come-something-else', most cherished cat.

Miabella, as we call her, runs the place. She does not hesitate to remind, indeed pester and annoy us if things do not go her way.

Every afternoon at 5pm Miabella is given some roasted chicken pellets as a treat. She loves them and we dare not overlook such a thing as this insistent, incessant, unrelenting feline never forgets to remind us that this is her time!

Reminders are part of life. When I served with UnitingWorld my focus was on working with churches in Asia. I would often be booked on an early flight out of Sydney to Singapore to make connections to either India, Indonesia, Korea or somewhere else.

On these occasions my alarm would rudely interrupt my rest, shattering the peace of a good night's sleep urging me to get up, get ready and be prepared for a rendezvous with my taxi to the airport at 5.00am.

These days, each Sunday morning is much the same. The alarm prompts me to wake, get up and drive across to West Epping, mostly in the dark, to prepare for worship in plenty of time before my eager parishioners start arriving after 7.30am. *(PAUSE)*

This morning we encounter a story about such reminders. In both the examples I share with you, there is a clear-cut and most definite urgency about them. Indeed, if I didn't get to the airport on time to check-in, go through immigration and security, then I would miss my flight and subsequently ruin many meticulously planned conversations and meetings.

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Likewise, to sleep-in on Sunday morning and fail to turn up for worship would be a neglect of duty. It wouldn't make me the most popular minister in town!

Wake-up calls are a focus of our text this morning as we read from Matthew 25. This Gospel was most likely written about fifty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus to a community of second generation Christians of Jewish origin, possibly in Syria. It speaks in a time of great upheaval and immense uncertainty.

The Romans had sacked the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the magnificent temple. For Jews this was a crisis of unspeakable, indeed, unbearable, proportions because the temple was the dwelling place of God. It was here that people would gather to remember the past and to celebrate what God had and was doing for them. Life hinged around the temple. Now it was gone.

Turmoil followed. The Zealots attempted to make a military stand against Rome and a splinter group, the Sicarii, took a final stand on Masada, an ancient fortified pinnacle in Judean desert. But their attempts failed and the Jews were left bereft.

Some years later the militant Simon bar Kokhba led another revolt. Declared the Messiah by many of his followers, he was crushed by Rome as more than half a million Jewish rebels were slaughtered. The Emperor, Hadrian subsequently decreed the name "Judea" be changed "Syria Palestina". The Jews were driven out to become exiles, refugees and slaves in other parts of the world.

The land became known as Palestine.

Now, amidst all this terror, people who followed Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed him as the Messiah. It was in Jesus, the Christ, that God was present. It was in this teacher from Galilee, who was crucified and raised from the dead, that the future lay. It was in the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed, God's reign of peace and justice, that one was to find direction and purpose.

And friends, today's reading from Matthew's Gospel is a timely reminder that this is so even today!

Jesus often spoke about the coming Kingdom of God in terms of a feast or a wedding banquet. This is a feast, this is a banquet to which all are invited. And this was an invitation that the early Christians held onto as the world around them catapulted into turmoil.

Now, the story we read in Matthew concerns ten bridesmaids, young women or virgins who are preparing to meet the bridegroom. It becomes dark and five of them have no oil for their lamps.

But in their attempt to find more oil they miss the critical moment, they fail to witness the arrival of the guest of honour, only to be excluded from the following proceedings as the doors are shut in their face.

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This rather blunt parable speaks about the coming kingdom but its punch line is really in the form of an alarm clock. It's a wake-up call. It's a mayday alert that demands our attention as the bridegroom suddenly turns up and the wedding feast begins.

Friends, the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids is meant to break into our routines with a sense of urgency. Its purpose is to intrude into our daily lives awakening us and unsettling us to the reality of God's coming reign of justice and peace. And because of this – we need to be ready, we must be prepared.

The early Christians were under significant pressure. Many of their counterparts were joining forces with the Zealots or signing up with other militant Jewish forces to revolt against Rome. Meanwhile, Jews and Christians had experienced a sad parting with a split between the synagogue and the ekklesia (or church). This isolated many Christian communities, making them quite vulnerable.

Now, Jesus says the five foolish bridesmaids in this parable are literally "stupid". They are easily misled and quite superficial in their attitude and commitment. They are "silly", being caught up in the moment and easily distracted, side-tracked and misled.



The five wise bridesmaids, on the other hand, are discerning. They are "with it". They know where the priority lies and they are fully prepared to stick with task at hand. One commentator describes them as being "prudent", "well-judged" and "vigilant".

Here Jesus issues a wake-up call. Jesus exhorts us to avoid being complacent.

Don't let yourself be side-tracked by looking for easy answers or quick fixes. Don't lose heart and just walk away from it all. The darkness may descend. God may seem a long way off. God's church may even appear to be losing its way. But don't retreat. Don't pull away in an effort to find meaning and purpose in other ways that simply offer immediate but often shallow, superficial options.

Rather, Jesus calls on us to keep enough oil our lamps for the hard times. Hold onto to the faithfulness God has demonstrated in the past. Remember how God has blessed you throughout your lives. Never forget the self-giving sacrifice of our Lord and the incredible victory of his resurrection that was all done for you!

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For, God's promises are sure and certain even when they may appear to be fading or absent!

With these things in mind, I believe we received a remarkable wake-up call here in Sydney just a few days ago. At a time that could easily be equated with the minutes leading up to midnight in the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, the father of eight-year old boy, who had been tragically killed, spoke out.

Last Thursday Raed was sitting in the hearse as it carried his son's body to Rookwood Cemetery for burial. The little boy was one of two boys crushed to death two days before when a vehicle careered through the wall of their classroom in Greenacre.

It was a horrific event. As Raed spoke, I was stopped in my tracks as he offered forgiveness for the driver who killed his son.

*"Forgive her...it could have happened to any one of us," he said. "She is welcome to come and sit with the family, have a meal and talk about how they can move forward..."*

*"Forgive her"*. I believe these words toll loudly in a world that so readily seeks vengeance.

*"Forgive her"* pierces the darkness of an "eye-for-an-eye" mentality that often surfaces in such times.

*"Forgive her"* challenges the claim there can be no God when such tragic things happen.

*"Forgive her"* is a reminder, its wake-up call, it's an alarm bell announcing God's reign is actually near!



Brothers and sisters in Christ, today we are invited to stand firm and be prepared for the challenges, the ambiguity, the uncertainty and even the darkness that is around us.

We are also prompted, urged, even rudely awakened to the truth that God does not abandon God's people. Rather God's promises are sure and certain. The coming reign of God is assured just as the bridegroom did turn up in the middle of the night.

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**But there is more. The wake-calls and the warning bells we encounter today are not only there to simply prompt, urge and awaken us. They are there as signs that the reign God is at hand. The reign of God is beginning right now. The reign of God is a reality that each one of can encounter today!**

**Not only do I see this in Raed forgiving the driver who killed his son, I see this in the lives of people here in West Epping, especially as some of you face critical medical procedures with such courage.**

**I see it in the way many of you care for one another. I witness it in the commitment so many of you make to our activities. I see it in the faith of our children, in the testimonies of our families and in the conviction of our seniors, especially as those of you who are coming to end of your lives.**

**So, whatever you do, don't miss out. The wake-up call is issued. The alarm bell is ringing. God's reign of justice and peace is at hand.**

**What will you do - how will you respond?**

**Amen.**

