

When I read this parable again this week, I was struck by the strangeness of it and the fact it has lots of awkward details. For instance, what's the bridegroom doing turning up at midnight? What does the bride think about that? In fact, where is the bride in the story? And after arriving so late, why is the bridegroom so harsh with the foolish bridesmaid and shut the door on them? Why are the wise bridesmaids so stingy with their oil? They send off the foolish bridesmaids to buy some more. Who do they think is selling oil at midnight? I'm going to dodge all of these questions. I don't want to get bogged down into detail. I want to just take a more broad brushstroke approach and pick out what clearly are the main points of this parable.

And the main point clearly seems to be that the parable reminds us that one day there will be a great Messianic banquet at the end of time, just as Jesus promised, just as that theme runs through all the scriptures, the Old Testament, the New Testament, that theme of an end. In a couple of weeks, we'll be in the season of Advent, and this is very much a pre-Advent reading. And Advent is not about getting ready for Christmas. Advent is about thinking ahead, so the second coming of Jesus at the end of time. Advent is our annual reminder that there will be an end, that God will one glorious day act to establish a new kingdom of justice and of peace. Now, this is not the most comfortable or popular aspect of Jesus's teaching, but it can't be ignored because it's a recurring theme throughout Jesus's teaching as it is indeed throughout the whole of scripture. Jesus was pretty clear that he'd be crucified, buried, raised on the third day and then come again in glory on some unspecified date.

And this is a message we particularly need to hear in these uncertain times. We know all too well the wars that currently are raging in the world, wars which involve nuclear powers. We're constantly reminded of the existential threats that face the world, climate change being just one. And we can't agree on how we're to respond to these significant threats. The world seems out of control and in some sense it is. But this parable and the forthcoming Advent season reminds us that the

end belongs to God. The world may spin out of control, but there always remains the hope of restoration. One day, God's kingdom where peace and justice will reign, will be established. There will be a banquet when all God's people sit down together in peace and harmony.

This vision, as I've said, runs through the whole Bible. We see it in that reading where it comes across strongly in the reading we had from Thessalonians, our epistle for today. We see it there in that reading we had from Isaiah where the prophet talks about the days to come. Isaiah, like all the prophets, talked about the day, a coming day when God will act, and Isaiah foresees a day when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation and war shall be no more." And in dark times, we need to hold on to that promise of restoration. In our broken and fallen world, we need armies and weapons to keep the peace. And today we give thanks for all those who have served to maintain that peace and the freedom we enjoy, and we do that whilst longing for the day when there will be no armies, no more war, when all swords have been broken into plowshares.

What I find most abhorrent about war is the keeping score, the constant news headlines that so many people have died on this side and so many people have died on that side. In war, people are reduced to mere statistics. The death of God's creatures is labeled collateral damage. War is the ultimate dehumanizing process, but the end of history is not war. It is God's kingdom of peace, a kingdom in which that which has been lost will be restored, a kingdom in which the nameless dead will be fully known. All this talk of ends and endings is unsettling. It's clearly there in this parable.

The foolish bridesmaids arrive too late for the wedding and the door is closed to them. And we don't like that talk, any of us. But endings are part of life, a life which we all know will end with death. Time runs out, doors close, chances fade. We know this, it's part of life. We experience it regularly. The opportunity to mend the friendship, forgive the debt, break the habit, write the check, heal the wound, confront the injustice, release the

bitterness, all those chances close down. Opportunities end. We hate saying this because we all think, "Well, there's always tomorrow. There's always more time." We kid ourselves. What if there isn't? What if the parable is telling us to be alert now, awake now, act now? What if it's inviting us to live each day, singular and fleeting as it is, as all we have. Tomorrow, if it comes, will be its own gift, its own miracle, its own challenge with its own opportunities. Let's not presume that it belongs to us. Let us do what is holy and necessary now.

And of course, this is a parable also to be prepared. We live our lives with the end in mind. The bridesmaids in the story are called wise because they thought ahead and they were prepared. We too need to be prepared. There was a medical student in England called Michael Cummins, and at the end of his first year of medical studies, he had an oral exam, and he was shown various organs in jars, and the test was that he had to name the organ and to name what was wrong with it. So, the examiner held up the first jar and Michael Cummins says, "Oh, that's a brain." "No," said the examiner. "It's a pancreas." He held up another jar. Michael Cummins said, "Oh, that's a liver." The examiner said, "No, no, that's an appendix." "Mr. Cummins," said the examiner, "You don't seem to have any knowledge of medicine after your first year of study." And Michael Cummins said, "Well, I thought the test was tomorrow."

Of course, that's a lame excuse. Can't prepare like that. Some things can't be left to the last minute, like medical studies and faith. When Mary of Orange was dying, her chaplain came to her bedside and started to talk to her about the way of salvation. Mary stopped him and said, "I have not left this matter to the last hour." She'd prepared. She knew that faith takes time to develop. She'd been following Jesus's advice to store up treasure in heaven. Having started by saying I wasn't going to get bogged down in detail, there is one detail I want to finish with, something I'd never noticed in this story before. I noticed this week when I read it that the oil belonging to the foolish bridesmaids hadn't actually run out. It wasn't completely gone.

Their oil supply was low, but not extinguished. Their lamps were going out, but they hadn't gone out.

They assumed that their oil supply was more important to the groom than their presence with him, that he wouldn't want them if they were only shining half brightly. So, they ditched the scene at the most crucial moment and went shopping, depriving the groom and the guests of their presence at the banquet. And one lesson that this parable might teach us is that we are more valuable than oil, so we should stick around. Maybe some of us recognize that feeling of how hard it is to stick around when our resources are low, when our light is fading. Some of us feel that we have to have everything burning on full cylinders. Everything has to be right or perfect in order for us to show up to God or to friends or the church or whoever. It's scary and makes us vulnerable to linger in the dark when our pitiful little lamp is flickering, that our once robust faith has evaporated. Only a bridesmaid who trusts in the unconditional love of the bridegroom can dare to turn up when their resources are low.

But we have a bridegroom who loves us unconditionally, who loves us in our half flickering light when things are messy and imperfect because we are of intrinsic value to the groom. We need to find the honesty and the courage to stay. So perhaps the lesson of this parable is to not allow our fear and our sense of inadequacy to keep us away from the party. Be willing to show up as you are, complicated, disheveled, half lit, half-baked. The groom delights in you, not your lamp. Your light doesn't have to dazzle. Remember, God is light. Jesus is the light of the world. Your half empty flask of oil isn't the point. You are. So stay.

Amen.