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Text: Matthew 25:1 – 13

Place: midweekchurch

Title: Are you wise or foolish?

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The wedding Jesus describes in **Matthew 25** is a bit different to how we celebrate weddings. Jesus talks about everyone waiting for the groom, which is the way it was in his day, but for us everyone waits for the bride. Katherine turned up on time for our wedding, but the photographer wanted to take a photo of me anxiously checking my watch anyway. But in some of the weddings I've conducted the grooms have been very anxious! They pace and sweat and check their watches. When I tell them not to worry a couple of said that they *were* worried – she might have changed her mind and was not going to turn up!

I don't know how they would have coped in the situation Jesus describes because the weddings in his day didn't start at a set time, but when the groom turned up! Imagine a group of fellas sitting around in their monkey suits for who knows how long – when she turns up she turns up! Everyone would fall to pieces.

Jesus tells a story about ten teenage girls, all friends of the bride who are waiting for the groom to come. And everyone of us is one of them; you and I are in this story!

But he makes a distinction between them: wise or foolish.

The parable challenges us to consider whether we are truly wise, or fatally foolish.

As Jesus does with all his other parables, he draws us in and makes us realise that our response to the parable, or our identification with those in the parable help us understand some vital things about ourselves.

Let's have a closer look at the parable so we can see whether we are truly wise or terribly foolish.

Weddings seem to be such an important picture for Jesus. He uses that picture time and again. Heaven for Jesus is not sitting on clouds. It's a party. A feast. A wedding reception. That speaks so much about his joy, the joy set before him that enabled him to endure the Cross. He is looking forward to the day.

Chapter 25 begins, **At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.** We need to understand what 'at that time' means. Back in **chapter 24** the disciples ask Jesus when the end of the world will be. He spends that chapter telling them that the day and hour of his return cannot be known. He says in **verse 42** **Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. Verse 44 says So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.**

People have embarrassed themselves and discouraged others by their failed predictions. Back in the 1970s Hal Lindsay made a motza when he published books about the second coming. He conceded that Jesus said we won't know the day or hour, but he felt that that allowed us to know the year, or at least the decade. So he predicted the mid-eighties as when Jesus would return.

Twenty years after that date he is still at it on his web site. His slogan is 'politically incorrect – prophetically correct' - well at least if you forget the bit about the eighties. It's a shame his books didn't have a money back guarantee.

Instead, Jesus knew it would be a long time before he returns and stresses again and again we won't know the day, we won't expect it, so be ready at all times. And then he tells five parables illustrating that we need to be ready at all times. I get the impression that Jesus wants to stress that!

And in four of those five parables there is someone or a group of people who are surprised by his return, to their eternal shame. So when our parable begins Jesus says **At that time.**

At that time, when he returns to earth, the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise.

And that is when the parable begins to get a bit scary. When Jesus returns he will find two groups of people. One group will be wise and the other will be foolish. So often in his parables Jesus gives only two choices. We are either one or the other. And we need to know which one we are. The scary bit is the two groups are initially so similar.

All ten girls had received invitations to the wedding. They had all accepted that invitation. They were all part of the group eagerly awaiting the arrival of the groom. For all intents and purposes they were all as good as at the wedding. All that was needed was for the groom to turn up and everything could start.

The groom was at his parents' house, finalising the preparations. Then he would head over to the brides' family's house and greet her, and then the procession would move to his house where the banquet would be held. So all the girls were waiting excitedly at the bride's house, looking out the window, checking she had everything she needed, looking out the window again. The wise ones took oil in jars along with their lamps while the foolish ones had their lamps but no extra oil.

That sounds a bit harsh because the 'foolish' ones had worked everything out. They knew that the party wasn't going to go all night – the wedding day was today, wasn't it? So they took a reasonable, measured look at the situation and brought all they needed. And besides, who wants to lug around a jerry can of oil while you're in your party dress? They've got it sorted, planned out well, and with a bit of luck everything will work out fine.

But things don't always work out fine. Things don't always go as we expect. A series of things go wrong: The groom is late. The oil has run out. The shops are shut. And when they got everything sorted out, the door to the banquet was shut too. Then we hear those terrifying words: they are outside and excluded.

But it gets worse: They bang on the door wanting to come in, knowing they have a right to be in. They were only gone a little while! But the groom calls out from behind the locked door **'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'** What a terrible situation! They looked so much like the other five. They were right there! They were waiting!

But Jesus said this back in **Matthew 7:21 – 23**

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform

many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

Jesus describes a terrible reality where some people think they have a place in heaven, that they know Jesus and are OK but are not known by him.

And so he asks us over and over again: ‘Is that you? Are you one of the foolish ones who will miss out? Or are you wise? Do you know for sure?’

Well we need to think about that.

Am I prepared rightly? Am I wise? How can I know?

The first thing we need to understand is that the end of our life or the return of Christ is too late to get ready. In **verse 6** we read **At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’** The foolish girls start hunting around then and they miss out.

When I did the HSC I had a friend who didn’t have the best of study techniques. While the rest of us were getting ready to head into the exam room he was surrounded by notes and books, trying to get the last bit of information in. He knew this exam was coming, but studying on the morning was like trying to tip the knowledge into his head and let it dribble out through his pen. Our time of reckoning had come. Studying on the morning of the exam was too late.

When we are all summoned to meet the bridegroom on that great and terrible day it’s too late to try and change then. The time for that has passed.

The difference between the wise and foolish was that the wise were ready. In every other respect they looked the same, part of the community waiting for the groom’s arrival. Friends of the bride. I don’t believe that having the extra oil signifies that these girls ‘had something’ the other girls didn’t. It wasn’t more faith, or good works, or anything. They were prepared for the long haul. They knew that all the party dresses and all the fun so far meant nothing if they missed out on what they were all there for: the wedding itself. And there was no way they were going to miss out on that.

What counted was being ready.

Jesus tells five parables in a row about being ready. *Five!* Do you get the feeling that he’s concerned that people won’t be ready? In fact in **Luke 18:8** Jesus asks **When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?**

It appears that Jesus feels that the long time between his first and second advents, while giving everyone an opportunity to be saved, will also be a test of people’s faith. When the announcement is made, and the trumpet sounds, who will answer the call? We need to be ready now.

So how can we do that? How can we be ready?

I want to ask three fundamental questions and then think about a situation that might help us assess where we are.

Three fundamental questions.

First: are you trusting in Jesus alone for your salvation?

It’s the question of faith.

Salvation is by faith. We receive salvation by trusting God's promises, not doing enough good things to earn it. We cannot contribute to our salvation. It's through faith – trust. Can you answer truthfully that you are trusting in Jesus and in Jesus alone for your salvation? Are you accepting his grace, trusting his promises, relying on Christ as your righteousness?

The second fundamental question: Is there evidence of fruit in your life?

Do you see proof that God is working in your life? I'm not necessarily talking miracles, but day to day growth. Is there evidence of the fruit of the Spirit: **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control**. Can you look at your life and humbly acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is working these things in you?

The third fundamental question: Are you persevering?

How we finish is so important. The foolish girls didn't last the distance. They weren't prepared for the long haul. Jesus said back in **Matthew 24:12 & 13 Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved**. It's a corruption of the gospel to sell it as insurance, a ticket to heaven you can file away and draw on at the end. It's not a get out of gaol free card.

We're meant to be persevering, keeping trusting, keeping growing, ready. How you and I finish is crucial.

And are you still trusting today, not relying on some event in the past? Peter tells us in **2 Peter 1:10 Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure**. When Jesus returns he will be looking for an active, persevering faith.

If you are struggling to answer any of these three questions, I urge you to come and speak to Stephen or I soon. It's not good to leave doubt hanging over such fundamental issues.

There is a way to help us assess where we stand in all of this.

When Jesus returns it will be a crisis. In fact it will be the great crisis. By crisis I mean a point when our motives will be revealed. A crisis exposes what's really going on in our hearts. So how we respond to smaller crises through our life indicates how we will respond to the great crisis of Jesus' return. It could have been sickness, or a death in the family, losing a job, times of stress that were truly crises.

When you think back on those real tests, those crises in your life, how did you respond? Did you express faith in it? Even if God seemed absent in that time? Could you have peace because you were trusting God rather than trying to control it all yourself? Did your love for God deepen as a result, or did you move away from him?

Jesus tells us this parable because he wants us to be ready. He wants us to be wise. He doesn't want us excluded.

So are you ready?

Are you being wise – with eternity in mind – or are you being fatally foolish?