

Sermon for 9am Sunday 6th November 2011, St Peter's

Matthew 25:1-13 The parable of the 10 virgins

Who's going to miss the party?

Who went to a firework display last night?

I didn't.

Neither of us did.

We didn't miss out completely though, because we live close enough to the school to have received the full force of the pops, bangs and whizzes. But we didn't get the pretty colours, the patterns in the sky, or the sparklers :-)

But it's OK, we did it out of choice. A choice we made four years ago when we acquired a cute little terrier dog, who turned out to be a complete psycho when it comes to loud noises! We've had to learn to live with the consequences of that decision, one of which is we don't go to firework parties.

The reading this morning is all about 10 young ladies who likewise reap the consequences of their decisions.

When I'm in the garden with the dog at night, I don't really need a torch because we've got streetlights near at hand. But there are a couple of dark corners, so it does help a bit. It also helps if I make sure that I get some spare D size batteries before the torch's old batteries run out. Recently I completely failed - never occurred to me. No spare batteries. So I put them on the Tesco order. But they didn't have any either. So, once again I get to reap the consequences of my decisions.

Just like 5 of the young ladies in today's story, I get to stay out in the dark.

Of course there weren't streetlights in Jerusalem when Jesus was alive. So 10 pretty young things hanging around in the dark late at night rather needed their oil lamps - especially when it turned out the person they'd gone out to meet, was late.

It's obvious, they were all eager to meet the bridegroom, because they wanted to be at the party; the wedding party that brought to a conclusion the rather complicated process of Jewish marriage.

But because 5 of them were disorganised, or had rather apathetically not given the matter any thought at all, they missed out on all the fun. Not only did they miss the spectacle of the bridegroom finally bringing his bride home, but they got shut out the party, and not let in even when they arrived later. Their party was over before it had even started.

Of course, we're waiting for the ultimate party this morning, aren't we?

I hope you've brought your party hats our streamers?

You haven't?

You haven't brought them?!

Oh I'm sorry, that's a pity....because I brought the champagne especially!!!!

But we are waiting aren't we? All of us?

Waiting for Jesus to come again in glory? Even though we don't know what that's going to look like, or when it's going to happen, we're waiting in expectation aren't we?

Waiting to experience God's ultimate party as God finally reveals his new heaven and his new earth... when the Kingdom of God is fully revealed?

Because that's what this parable is all about.

Jesus is emphasising something that he's immensely concerned about. So concerned about that this is only the 2nd of three parables on the subject in Matthew's Gospel!

Jesus wants everyone to be ready. At the time of talking about this with his disciples, he knows that shortly he will be killed. But it's obvious he also knows that he'll be back: not just as his risen self on Easter morning but at the point when God brings his fallen world to completion and perfection.

Jesus you see, knows he's the bridegroom. Very early on in his ministry he identified himself as 'the bridegroom'. When asked why his disciples didn't undertake the Jewish customs of fasting he replies

"How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast." (Matt 9:15)

Again in Matthew 22, one of the earlier Parables of the Kingdom, makes the ideas clear. The parable of the wedding banquet explains Jesus is the Son of the King in heaven who is laying on the wedding feast. Many are invited, but some chose not to come. Others' do not have the right clothes.

Yet, as Jesus has so clearly said earlier in this teaching that he's giving his followers about the Kingdom of God:

"But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (Matt 24:36)

We don't know the where, the when or the how. We're not meant to. But Jesus wants us to be ready for it just the same. Like any good friend he doesn't want the people he knows and loves to be left out, to miss out on being part of God's completed Kingdom, which he WILL be back to bring into being.

At other points in his time on earth, Jesus told his friends what they, and we, need to do to be part of the Kingdom of God, to be let into the bridegrooms wedding feast. It is quite clear for example that we are to be obedient to God's will, and bear fruit - exactly as we were hearing last week. Jesus was the vine, but we needed to be pruned in faith and action to bear fruit.

Matthew's Gospel puts it this way:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven.” (Matt 7:21)

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” (Matt 7:24)

In John's Gospel of course we hear Jesus famously putting it like this:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

These things then, are what Jesus wants people to do if they are to be in the right place with God to be invited into the wedding feast. We are to believe, to be obedient and to put God's plan for the world into action, while we wait for the bridegroom.

So, we don't need the silly hat*, the streamers* or even the bottle of champagne* ...(put them back in box)... if we "keep watch" for the bridegroom.

Except even at the time of Matthew writing this Gospel, the bridegroom appeared to be late. He was taking his time coming back again. Given the way Matthew labours the point in this and other parts of the Gospel we can assume that the doubts were beginning to creep in among the earliest Christians. Was it all a hoax? Was all the talk of God bringing to fulfilment his Kingdom, part of some elaborate wind-up?

No, it wasn't.

But 2000 years or so later, when we're still waiting, we can perhaps understand a little why many people might think so. Yet, we still have to "keep watch", even though we don't know the day or the hour, we mustn't doze off, because the Messiah is coming back.

And that of course is why we have this reading in this part of the church calendar, just before Advent, not long before Christmas. At the time when Jesus actually spoke these words, part of his message was that he wanted the people of Israel to recognise him as their Messiah, to believe, before it was too late. Those who understood who he was, and what he was on earth to do, would be those whose work would be putting the building blocks of God's Kingdom in place; carrying out his work after he'd left them... temporarily.

Because of course, we don't know for sure if we'll be going to that ultimate wedding feast. Sitting here, keeping watch, we don't know who has enough oil, and who doesn't, and we mustn't try to fall into the trap of seeking to make any judgements.

“For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”
(Matt 7:2)

But, what I think we can recognise is that those who have never heard about the Messiah, may not be even waiting with us for Jesus to come again. Or if they have heard about the Messiah, and have been too apathetic to do anything about it, we're not allowed to give them any of our oil because it's our own personal supply. It's not a case of there “may not be enough” for us and our friends, but that there “is not enough”.

Because before we can believe, obey and be prepared, there is grace. This is what St Paul said:

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. (Eph 2:8)

And God's grace is a very personal gift, that comes made just for us. If it wasn't so, we wouldn't understand ourselves to be loved as individuals by God, each gifted with our very own boxed set of lamp oils to use wisely.

The grace of God that saved me is a personal possession and it is non-transferable. You can't have it.

God chose not to reveal definitively one way or the other whether his grace extends beyond the second coming, though this reading, and some of the others' in Matthew's Gospel that I've touched on, suggest it doesn't.

However, Jesus has not yet returned, so God's grace is still freely available to everyone; their own personal dollops of the stuff. God's grace definitely hasn't stopped yet.

God's grace is what starts the ultimate party.

God's grace, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.

God's grace, nailed to a cross.

God's grace in an empty tomb.

With firework night over, the next big party is Christmas, and I wonder whether we're prepared?

You're right, we don't need the hats, the streamers... or the champagne.

But before God's Kingdom is complete, and before we get to go to the ultimate party, the wise have got to carry on being prepared. We still have work to do. Which means we need to be at the manger this Christmas.

If we are to be as awake as this passage asks us to be, then as we visit the manger we mustn't be alone. We must have others with us who are as excited to be there as we are.

Which among us is best prepared is for God to judge, not us.

But if we're aren't there, and we haven't got our friends with us, then no one will be entering the party, when the bridegroom finally comes.

