The wise and the foolish

Matthew 25.1-13

Let me fill you in on the background of the parable we have have today from St Matthew. The wedding customs of 1st century Palestine were very different from ours. The girls were waiting for the bridegroom to come to the bride's house for the wedding. They didn't know when he would come - because in those days weddings were not arranged for 3.30 in the afternoon, or whenever. A visitor in my lifetime (and I was 80 last week!) found that is sometimes still true in some Middle-Eastern villages. It might be tonight, it might be tomorrow. They would walk with the groom as joyful companions to his bride's home. They were not bridesmaids as we know them - probably neighbours children, people like that.

So what is the parable about? Let me remind you that to understand parables we need to understand them firstly as they were originally said and heard, secondly as the people who wrote down the gospels understood them, and then we can begin to see what they might mean for us today. Those three interpretations may not necessarily be the same. In this parable we have a very good example of the difference between the first two. It is quite obvious what the story *as is written* is trying to say. It is calling people to look out for the return of the Lord Jesus - to be ready and waiting for the second coming. But it only takes a moment's thought to see that this couldn't possibly be the way that Jesus intended his original hearers to take it. He hadn't got through to them at this stage that he would be leaving them, so there was no point in teaching them about being ready for his return.

If you are very familiar with the parables, you might notice that this one is different from the other parables of the kingdom. Most of them start 'The Kingdom is like…'. But this one starts 'On that day, the Kingdom of God will be like…' The words 'On that day' - in fact just one little word - *tote* in Greek - was a favourite expression of Matthew. It tells us clearly that we should suspect there is a lot of Matthew as well as a lot of Jesus in this story, and in the way that it is told. And the moral tacked on the end, which is rather unlike Jesus anyway - he usually lets the story speak for itself - is really a bit silly. It says in effect 'keep awake, don't be caught napping' Yet if we look at the story **all** the girls are caught napping when the bridegroom comes. The wise as well as the foolish have gone to sleep. And that doesn't come in for any criticism at all. So Matthew was just slightly twisting the story to fit the moral. We should not carp at this - we all do the same as we try to refit the parable to own day and age.

So let's go back to what Jesus was saying at the time when the story was told (minus the moral at the end). He was saying that something was going to happen which was the moment of crisis for them all. The moment when their readiness or otherwise would be tested out. He was getting at his Jewish friends who were waiting for the Messiah - as they all were. He was the one they were waiting for, but some of them were not ready to play their part in his arrival. They had decided that they knew best - when he

would come, and how much oil they would therefore be needing. When they discovered that they didn't know it all - then they were left without enough oil to cope. There were men so convinced they knew when the Messiah was coming that they didn't need to make any elaborate preparations as yet. Elijah hadn't come, so it wasn't yet a while. But as we know, Jesus had taught that John the Baptist was the Elijah who was to prepare the way for the Messiah. So he was saying simply in this parable - don't presume too much, be ready at all times. In me you are going to see the arrival of the groom and the moment of crisis. If you are not coming with me, you may find you are shut out. The picture of the wedding feast, or some other kind of feast, was the picture he and the Jewish teachers shared of the coming of the Kingdom. Once the groom had arrived, latecomers wouldn't be admitted.

But the earliest Christians had reinterpreted the story for their own day. The bridegroom had arrived in the person of Jesus - the people who were reading this story had indeed already come into the kingdom, and some of those who ought to have been ready (the non-believing Jews) had been shut out. But that wasn't the whole story. The early Christians had their own waiting to do - very much akin to the Jewish waiting for the Messiah. They were waiting for the promised return of Jesus. It was a burning issue in the first years of the church. Was it a matter of days, weeks, months or years? They had no idea. Today's New Testament reading is from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians – written at a time when they were expecting his return any day. So for many people there was a need to inculcate a sense of urgency and expectancy. He was coming - it might be anytime - so we must be ready. So in the first years, this was said loud and long, and people were prepared to give up their jobs to wait for the day of the Lord. People didn't bother to get married, because the end of things was so near at hand. We don't have this kind of expectancy, because we know that the time-scale is longer than they thought, and indeed Paul modified his view as time went on. But there is no doubt that the way Matthew re-tells this story underlines the worries and hopes and urgency of the early church as they looked for the return of Jesus in power. Ultimately they had not changed the meaning of the parable, but they had re-applied to themselves in their new situation.

Can we dare do the same - it isn't such a desperate dare? The word is not that we should drop everything, so that we don't miss the coming of the bridegroom. It is simply to be ready for it. The girls were all asleep, and they woke up when the time was right. There was nothing they could do to hasten the time of the bridegroom's arrival. He came when he was ready - and that applies to us as we wait for the return of Christ. And when he does return, there is no doubt that we will know about it, whether or not we are prepared and ready for it. The word appears to be - 'be ready, and get on with normal living. Get your rest, your relaxation and so on.' It's a bit like the encouragement we have been getting recently to lay in three days of food and so on. It seems to be a word of warning to those over-zealous Christians who feel that if they are not working non-stop for the coming of the kingdom, at the expense of their humanity, their families, their health and their sanity, then somehow the Kingdom won't come. It is God's Kingdom, not ours, and it will come in spite of us, if not with our help. We are called to be ready, to

rejoice in it, but not to go demented. But on the other hand, that doesn't mean living as if we expected the bridegroom *never* to arrive. The idea of the oil is perhaps that being ready, being prepared, is a continuous process. The oil was constantly being used up, and needed replenishment. Just because we have had some oil - to put it in our terms, because we have been baptised, because we once went to church, because we have had some deep religious experiences - nothing like that lasts us for ever. It is in our on-going relationship with God that we are ready or not so ready. It still stands as a reminder to us of our need for living with God moment by moment, using the means of grace he has put at our disposal, filling our oil flasks from them.

If we talk in this way, we are relating our own interpretation very much to the way that Matthew and the other early Christians saw it. Maybe too we can go back to Jesus' original intention and update that as well. He was saying a crisis was going to come. It would be as they reacted to that crisis that they would be judging themselves. If they were ready to receive him, they would be able to enjoy the feast. That surely applies straightforwardly to us. In one way or another people today are still going to encounter this man Jesus, his message, and his challenge. If they are ready, they will be able to grasp what he is saying, and will be able to enjoy that encounter to the utmost. If on the other hand they are not ready for that encounter, they may not have the resources to cope. That is a good argument, for example for religious education. RE does not make children Christians, but maybe provides them with some oil to use when an encounter with Jesus happens - and when the possibility of going along with him and being part of his kingdom becomes a reality.

So this story continues to speak, as Jesus intended it to, to the non-believer, challenging us to see in Jesus the long-awaited bridegroom. It continues to speak to those of us who do believe, reminding us that we must always be ready, refilling our oil flasks. Are we as ready as we could be, so that we can get on with day to day living with confidence, knowing that when he comes, we will be fully equipped?