

23rd Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

As we draw towards the end of our journey through this liturgical year in which Matthew has been our main guide, we encounter a selection of parables which point us towards 'the end times'. With these eschatological parables, it can sometimes be hard to see beyond the immediate readings with which we are so familiar. But, as we discussed recently, the parables of Jesus resolutely resist the straitjacket of a single interpretive moral point and instead invite us into a critically reflective conversation about many different aspects of life. Today's well-known story is no exception to the rule and the way in which the foolish bridesmaids approach a critical moment of choice can provide an insight for us as we try to develop and deepen our spirituality of conflict practice.

Preparation

Either

Make two lists – one for each group of bridesmaids – of the adjectives you associate with them, or might use to describe them if you were relating this story. Do your lists tell you anything about how you yourself read the story, or about your responses to people in situations in which you are/have been involved?

or

Spend some time with an image of the Magdeburg Cathedral sculptures illustrating this story (Alamy has stock ones of each group which you can also enlarge here and here). Look at the faces and postures and then make a list of the emotions which you feel they express. Do your choices tell you anything about how you yourself read the story, or about your responses to people in situations in which you are/have been involved?

(If you have time it might be interesting to do both exercises and compare the lists)

Matthew 25:1–13

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.

Five of them were foolish, and five were wise.

When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them;

but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept.

But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’

Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps.

The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’

But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’

And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.

Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’

But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’

Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Comment

Matthew pays greater attention than the other Gospel writers to both the final judgement and to its definitive nature; and hand in hand with this is also a more pronounced focus on who is inside or outside the Kingdom of God. This emphasis tends to shape the primary direction from which we address his eschatological parables, which we almost invariably back-read through their end point of judgement and sorting. However these stories of Jesus can offer us helpful starting points for exploring a whole variety of matters – including our understandings of how our actions and reactions in different situations might be a help or a

hinderance to expressing the life of the Kingdom. So if we consider it without the usual eschatological lenses, what light can this particular story shed on our thinking about conflict and how we approach it?

Aside from the end result, attention in this cautionary tale is usually focussed on the difference in the level of advance preparation of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. However there is a second key divergence between the two groups which we tend to overlook but which provides us with a different angle of approach and thus another starting point for reflection: one group stays to welcome the bridegroom while the other decides there's a more pressing priority. The bridesmaids were part of the welcoming party assigned to meet the bridegroom and his friends and accompany them, with torches, singing, and dancing, to the place where the marriage was to be celebrated. It seems from verse 8 that the foolish bridesmaids did have at least some oil but they could see it wasn't going to last them much longer. Their pleas for a share arrangement having been refused (itself a further interesting starting point for reflection) they face a classic 'stick or twist' type dilemma: should they remain in place to welcome and accompany the approaching groom anyway and risk their torches guttering and going out *en route*, or should they rush off and try to get supplies to avoid this potential embarrassment? They decide to twist – even though the groom's arrival is known to be imminent – but the procession departs before they get back and they are left playing an unsuccessful game of catch-up.

Sadly though, it seems that 'stick' might have been a better choice in this instance: firstly it's clear that the bridegroom's party get safely to the venue, despite there being only half the number of lights amongst the bridesmaids – so seemingly the insufficient oil of the foolish five would not have been a major problem in that respect; secondly, it is not ultimately the state of these bridesmaid's lamps which determines the final outcome for them (after all, their re-ignited lamps don't secure them entrance when they finally arrive) – it is the fact that they simply were not there when the door was open. Presence, it appears, was more important than perfection.

We can sometimes encounter similar turns as we work to try and resolve difficulties and conflicts: plans going awry; preparations which suddenly seem inadequate; roles in which we become aware of having got out of our depth or where we can no longer fulfil all the parts expected of us (or that we expect of ourselves). In such scenarios there's a danger that we might, like the foolish bridesmaids, be stampeded into frantically trying to fix the ostensible 'problem' and miss the bigger picture, or overlook the importance of remaining present despite things not matching our imagined ideals. It would however be too simplistic to say that 'sticking with it' is always the correct course. Sometimes, as here, that may well be the case; on other occasions we might instead need to regroup, change plans, take drastic measures, step back etc. The point is rather that we need to attend properly to moments of change and decision in order to ensure that we *take agency in them*, rather than allowing ourselves to be driven *by them*.

The parable also gives us some indicators for how we can increase the likelihood of being able to do this. While it offers no direct emotional information connected with the bridesmaids it is very easy to imagine (we have probably all been in a comparable scenario!) that panic was a predominant feature in the initial reaction of the foolish ones, hindering their ability to critically evaluate the suggested 'solution' or to keep hold of the larger picture. This points us back to the other main difference between the two groups of bridesmaids which we explored on [our previous visit to this text](#) *viz.* that of preparation. We need to be proactively cultivating understandings and skills, along with habits of thought and life, which increase the degrees of freedom within which we can act when we encounter new or difficult situations. The more we understand about both particular conflict scenarios and about what drives our own responses within them, the better we will be placed to work with them in constructive ways – especially at those inevitable moments when things don't go quite as imagined or planned.

Response

Spend some time reflecting on a recent conflict situation (large or small) in which you have been involved, thinking particularly about moments of choice and whether the choices made were helpful or otherwise. If no particular conflict situation comes to mind then reflect more generally on recent choices you have made.

See if you can identify why you made particular choices and what, if any, underlying attitudes or habits informed or drove these. Were there differences here between decisions which had positive outcomes and those which were less successful? Is there anything which you might want to work on cultivating further, or perhaps changing in the light of these reflections?

Prayer

Jesus,

You know what it is
to face unexpected
or disconcerting situations,
to have to make choices
which can change a course
or reshape an outcome.

Help us
to grow and mature
in understanding
ourselves and others,
and to develop and deepen
habits of life and thought
which will enable us
to make wise choices –

whatever the situation we find ourselves in.

Amen.