

This time of year is wedding season and if you go down Jetty Rd on a Saturday you will see at least one if not two or three weddings going on. “Get me to the church on time” the old song goes. I guess these days it seems brides aim to be fashionably late. The first wedding I ever conducted was in a little wooden church at Stanthorpe near the Qld/ NSW border. The service was due to start and the bride had not arrived. The groom and his attendants were smoking outside the vestry. It was a stinking hot day and the groom’s mother who I had never leave her sick bed at home was being propped up and fanned by relatives. 15 minutes after starting time I asked the groom if something might be wrong. (No mobile phones in those days). He replied between puffs of smoke – “she said last night she would be 40 minutes late”. And so she was – 40 minutes late. Mother in law was nearly off to hospital, the boys had smoked a packet between them and the guests were passing out and thinking of leaving. The organist only brought one piece to play on an old pedal organ and I gave her permission to stop playing it before someone threw a hymn book at her. None of us were prepared for a delay of 40 minutes in the arrival of the bride. At the first wedding in my second parish the groom and his attendants and I were all ready standing in front of the altar on another Queensland stinker of a day when suddenly the groom uttered an expletive and ran out. The attendants told me he had forgotten the lapel flower and his mother would kill him if he wasn’t wearing it so he went home to get it out of the fridge! Meanwhile the bride had to be stuffed back in the car and taken around the block 8 times before he got back. She nearly changed her mind in all that thinking time! Legend has it that a wedding here at Glenelg almost started without one of the mothers who had been forgotten and was waiting at home for a lift that wasn’t coming!

Weddings, timing, restlessness, being prepared, missing out – that’s the stuff of Jesus’ story to us today in Matthew 25:1-13. Jesus doesn’t want us to miss out on his appearance at the end of time.

In the Bible I understand there are over 300 references to Jesus’ appearance at the end of time, his 2nd coming. Jesus himself promised it would happen, but did not give us a date to get ready by. He left the date open but said it would be sudden and unexpected.

Now many people in the world don’t believe Jesus Christ will appear at all. So for them life goes on as usual, ignoring Jesus Christ altogether and laughing at any suggestion the world might end. Others believe something could happen but are unconvinced and uncommitted to what the Bible says. Fundamentalist Christians get carried away with details about the second coming and its timing and often try and frighten the hell out of people with it. Most Christians know about it and believe it will happen but put it so far back in their minds that they rarely think about it at all.

In the first of three pictures or parables Jesus calls those who believe in him to be ready at all times for his return.

That is the simple point of Jesus story about the 10 girls who went to meet the bridegroom at a wedding. They had probably been attending to the bride all day and then were waiting for the groom to come for her. In those days the time of the wedding wasn’t always announced, that was part of the excitement. He could come at any time for his bride who was waiting for him. (Today it is often the other way around! He waits for her and wonders if she will turn up when it is getting late!)

Anyway the girls were all invited, they all had lamps to light the way for the bridegroom, and they all fell asleep when the groom took so long to come. (Maybe he was engaged in some last minute dispute with the father in law about the price for her!)

At midnight the groom turns up, and here is where the difference between the girls shows up - 5 had come prepared with extra oil for their lamps, 5 had not come prepared and were left in the dark. Five went into the wedding feast to celebrate, the other five panicked, tried to beg or borrow some oil from the others but there wasn’t enough to share, and running off to buy oil in the middle of the night they missed out on the celebration, The door was closed by the time they got back and it was too late, the bridegroom even denied knowing them. They couldn’t be bothered preparing properly for his big day.

In the parables we are not meant to ask what all the details might mean, but get the main point. The parable simply asks “will we be ready for Jesus when he comes for us.” **“Watch out then, because you don’t know**

the day or the hour” concluded Jesus.

The story sounds a bit harsh. But it is a warning for those of us who call ourselves Christians -

Not to become complacent.

Not to take our invitation for granted.

Not to imagine we can get our act together at the last moment.

It is a warning to people who are sitting on the fence about Christianity - wanting a bit each way, a bit of insurance in case its true but not really committed to Christ.

We may have faith now, but for that faith to be kept alive means fuelling it so it doesn't die out. An oil lamp doesn't suddenly lose all its fuel at once, but gradually it is burnt up over time and needs replacing. Faith doesn't usually disappear overnight but is often slowly burnt out sometimes without our realising what is happening. To prevent faith from going out, we need to keep refueling on God's word. There is no other way.

When a crisis comes we discover how strong or weak our faith really is. When Jesus returns is the ultimate crisis for faith - it will be too late to find faith that had grown cold or gone out then.

Luther said there are two things each person has to do on their own – die and believe. There are some things you can't borrow - a relationship with God is one of them. When Jesus comes you won't be able to borrow someone else's faith, you won't be able to say “My mother believed, or “ I went to Sunday School” or even “I go to church sometimes”, not to imagine we can say “I used to believe” “or “I belong to a Christian family” or “I go to church”, but at every moment being able to say with conviction, “I believe Jesus Christ is my only Saviour and Lord. I am going to heaven to the wedding feast because he died for me, by God's grace. Now I follow him as Lord of my life as I wait for him to appear or if I die first.”

“The best way to prepare for Christ is to never forget the presence of Christ” - to live in the awareness of Christ's presence with you and for you everyday in every situation. To be aware of and believe in his forgiving love which covers all your sins. And to live in the daily awareness that today could be the day we meet Jesus face to face.

Five girls were wise and five were foolish according to the story. In the Gospel according to Matthew wisdom has to do with hearing the word of God and responding to it, in faith and with your life. Foolishness has to do with ignoring God's gracious invitations and his warnings and not responding.

Right now the world treats Christians as fools for believing in Christ's return and being ready for it. But as in Jesus story about the girls, his own sudden arrival will reveal who has been wise and who has been foolish. And we won't have to panic, it won't be too late for all the things we should have said or done or believed, but in faith we will be ready to meet him and to go in to the wedding feast that never ends.

The good news today is that the door is still open, and God is at work through his church this morning around the world. As we get into the word, as we receive holy Communion and baptise people, God is at work inviting people into the kingdom, God is strengthening our faith, keeping the lamp lit at baptism alive and preparing our hearts to meet Jesus.