

The Wedding Banquet

Matthew 25: 1-23

“those who were ready went with him”

Rev Reg Weeks – 12 November 2017

(words in red indicate a change of Pp slide)

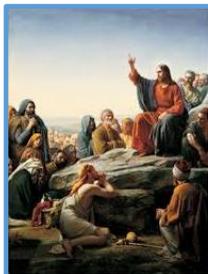


There was to be a Ball, and I loved dancing. As a teenager, **I and my** partner for the evening, would go with my parents. But this ball was many years later, when I was in my first parish in Gisborne, and had been elected to the Cook Hospital Board. It was the Hospital Ball, and my wife and I had been invited to a pre-ball party by the hospital Superintendent. We were anticipating a delightful evening – all I had to do was buy the tickets – but I forgot. Life was busy, and it wasn't till the day of the ball that I remembered. And by then, there wasn't a ticket to be had, for love nor money. I don't think I need to go into the fall-out from that particular indiscretion. It was certainly very embarrassing!



And that's what came to mind this week when I first read the parable which is the **Gospel reading** for today.

It wasn't hard to put myself in the shoes of those unfortunate bridesmaids who found themselves shut out of the wedding banquet.



I know what that feels like, and many sermons on this parable have focused on the five who were shut out. But as I read more carefully and dug deeper I began to wonder whether that was the main point of the story Jesus told. **Jesus often** spoke in parables and they have been read many ways.

The early church favoured an allegorical approach and looked for hidden meanings in every little detail.

However, later scholarship has found that a parable is generally told to make just one main point, and that will be most apparent to the audience who first heard it. So, the context is very important.

Added to that there is the literary choice of the Gospel writer. It's clear from a comparative reading of the four gospels that some stories are recounted only by one or two of the writers while the others leave them out. And sometimes they occur at different points in each writer's telling of the overall story. So, a secondary question is about who the intended readers were, and what the writer wanted to convey to them. In other words, you must ask – “What did Jesus mean?”, “What did the writer think Jesus was saying?” and finally “What might the story saying to us?”

A story about ten young bridesmaids who fell asleep while waiting for the groom. But where were they waiting, and how was it that the groom was the one to shut the door, and say he didn't know the five unfortunate ones who got shut out?

To answer those questions and to gain an understanding of what the first listeners would have heard, I consulted Mr Google to unearth the ancient Hebrew wedding traditions, and I found a well-researched paper by Roman Catholic Monsignor. He noted that it was the fathers who arranged the marriage, that early in proceedings the after the prospective couple had been introduced she was offered a glass of wine.

Drinking from the glass signalled her acceptance of the groom, and the engagement became official. The traditional words said by the groom at that point are the words Jesus said the disciples at the Last Supper as recorded by John:

“In my Father's house there are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you. And I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” So don't let your hearts be troubled”

The Msgr continues to say –

Once the 12 month period of the betrothal was finished and all the financial agreements reached and signed, the wedding could take place.

Autumn was the best time for marriages: the harvest was in, the vintage over, minds were free, and hearts were at rest. It was a season when the evenings were cool and delightful, and it was agreeable to sit up late at night. Usually the entire village gathered for a wedding.



*At the beginning of the wedding celebration, in the evening, the bridegroom, accompanied by his friends, went to fetch his betrothed from her father's house. A procession was formed, and the bride was carried **in a litter**. She was beautifully*

dressed and along the way people sang wedding songs.

When the procession reached the bridegroom's house, his parents bestowed a traditional blessing and after the prayers, the evening was passed in games and dancing. The bridegroom took part in the festivities, but the bride withdrew with her bridesmaids and friends to another room assigned for her.

*The next day there was again general rejoicing in the village. There was an early evening meal at which the men and women were served separately. This was a time for the giving of presents. The bride, surrounded by her ten bridesmaids sat under a canopy while traditional songs were sung, and blessings recited, **but the groom wasn't present.***

During the evening however, the groom arrived.

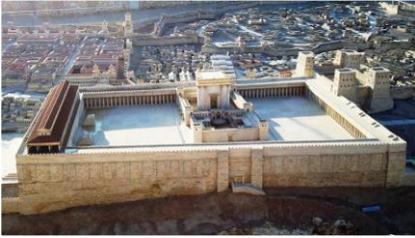
The Msgr doesn't note this, but I believe that's when the Bridesmaids would go out to greet the groom.

Now that the couple was together under the canopy, the wedding rituals took place, and after these, came the banquet.

The couple remained for the following days of celebration, sharing in the merriment, the songs, and the dancing.

So now we have a much clearer picture of what the story would have brought to mind for the listeners. It was the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking and they'd been with him on that momentous occasion when he turned the water into copious quantities of wine. They'd know doubt been to many village weddings and so Jesus didn't need to spell it out for them.

The bride and the bridesmaids were already in the home of the groom's father – the groom's home in fact, and there's every chance he would have no idea who these strangers were, clamouring outside his door, well after the celebrations had begun. Of course, if it was the recounting of a real occurrence then I guess he would have likely checked with his bride, but that sort of detail's not necessary in the telling a parable.



And Jesus told this story as part of his response to his disciples questioning, sometime during that last week in Jerusalem when they were sitting on the side of the mount of olives looking across the Kidron valley at the magnificent sight of

Herod's temple in all its glory.

He'd just told them that not one stone would be left on another. When's that gone to happen? What will be the signs?" they'd asked. "No one knows" said Jesus "Only the father" but he then proceeds with a series of worrying things that will occur. Wars, and rumours of wars, earthquakes, false prophets, an increase in lawlessness. "And the love of many will grow cold" he said.

In the middle of this quite long discourse, and having already told them to keep awake, he tells three parables of which today's reading is the middle one. The Faithful Servant, the Ten Bridesmaids, and the parable of the Talents, each giving an added perspective to the return of Master.

As a little segway, our parable finishes with the words "Keep awake for you know neither the day nor the hour" – a strange thing to say after just telling a story in which the main characters all fall asleep, and that's not even an issue. Perhaps Matthew added again what Jesus had said earlier, to reinforce the point that you need to remain ready to respond. In fact, the whole discourse, in that hillside garden, was meant as a preview of what was to come, beginning in a few short years with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. It had already happened when Matthew wrote his gospel, and Jesus had said, "All of this is but the beginning"

So why at this point does Jesus tell not just one, but three parables. They each feature the motif of the returning master, who has been away for an unexpectedly long time. In the first he says
“Blessed is the servant whom his master will find at work when his master arrives”

In the third, the one about the Talents, he says of the first two servants, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master” These are words of great encouragement to his friends in the midst of such a dismal forecast, and right in the middle of today’s parable we find the words, when the bridegroom finally does arrive:

“*those who were ready* went with him into the wedding banquet”

No matter that it was only half the expected number, *those who were ready* went in to join the fun, just as they’d been invited to do – in fact they were already part of the party, as were those with the talents who had done what they could. They got the warm handshake, the pat on the back, and entered in to their master’s joyful celebration.

“Fear not little flock” said Jesus on another occasion

“It’s the father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”

All that is required of us is to keep on being faithful in what we’ve been called to do. That will be sufficient when the master, or the bridegroom, finally arrives, because the party’s already begun.

What words of encouragement for a small congregation! Kia kaha!

Who would be silly enough not to buy a ticket to the Ball?

Who would be silly enough not to have enough oil?

Just hang in there! Keep up the good work! Not because that will earn you Brownie points but because you are already part of the team!



As Paul says in his letter to the small congregation in Galatia

“so let’s not grow weary in doing what is right” and the same words again in his letter to the Thessalonians

“Brothers and sisters, don’t be weary in doing what is right”

I think it’s summed up in the words of one of my favourite pieces of Celtic wisdom:

I met a stranger yest'r e'een;
I put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place;
And, in the sacred name of the Triune,
He blessed myself and my house.
My cattle and my dear ones,
And the lark said in her song,
Often, often, often,
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise;
Often, often, often,
Goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.

Who knows when the master will return,
but pray that when he does, he will find us faithful.