

Sermon preached by Jacqui Floyd at Roseville Uniting Church on 6 November 2011

Matthew 25:1-13

During our time in West Timor, Rob and I were invited to a number of weddings – partly I think because it was a bit of a novelty to have foreigners as guests. The weddings were big with hundreds of guests. What surprised us was that many couples chose to be married ‘western style’ with the brides wearing big white wedding gowns and the men in suits. And as I was talking to some of our Korean ladies at Kids Playtime this week I discovered this is also the case in Korea and I was interested to hear how they incorporate some traditional custom into these ‘western style’ weddings. No doubt some of you will have other stories of wedding traditions from your own countries of origin or from different cultures you have lived in.

In Indonesia I remember one particular wedding we were invited to which involved a significant Christian family in our local neighbourhood. They choose to be married twice, once according to traditional custom and then with a western style church wedding and reception.

The traditional marriage ceremony took place at the bride’s home. All the guest was seated waiting. Representative from the groom’s family arrived and offered the bride’s family a range of gifts (like a dowry). Negotiation took place and when it was all settled the groom arrived and met the bride at the door step of the bride’s home. The bride and groom then entered into the marriage ceremony (which in part involved eating certain foods which had symbolic significance for the young couple beginning their life together). Then all the guests were invited to join in a celebratory meal together.

Today’s passage reminded me a little of this marriage tradition where the groom would come to the bride’s home. In my reading about wedding customs at the time of Jesus, I discovered that a typical Jewish wedding took place at night. The groom would make his way to the bride’s home and as soon as any members of the wedding spotted the groom’s lamps approaching they would cry out through the streets, "The bridegroom is coming." The groom would wait at the door step of the bride’s home and the bride would come out to meet him. The couple, with their wedding party, would return together to the groom's home for the marriage ceremony and celebration.

In the Gospels we find Jesus would often used common life events to teach his disciples and others by telling a story with a message. And so today we hear Jesus telling a parable about a wedding celebration - ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the bride groom...

But Jesus says more than this ...he says that the kingdom of heaven will be like this ... this phrase 'the kingdom of heaven' appears 32 times in the Gospel of Matthew and the phrase 'the kingdom of God' appears about 65 times in other parts of the New Testament. It makes me think why did Jesus refer to the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven so many times – and what exactly does it mean?

I wonder how you would describe the kingdom of God? To me the kingdom of God is a realm of love in which God reigns. It is filled with justice, peace, beauty, restored relationships and its inhabitants have a deep appreciation of life in this kingdom.

Yet talking about the Kingdom of God can seem a little confusing at times. Is it now or is it coming? I recently read a book called 'This Beautiful Mess' by Rick McKinley –and it explores this question and suggests that the kingdom of God is now and also not yet. For we hear Jesus say 'the kingdom of God is within you or in your midst (Luke 17:21) but Jesus also says 'the kingdom of God is near' (Mark 1:15). So the kingdom of God is among us and yet to come. Something to experience now and to anticipate in the future when God's reign comes to completeness. Rick McKinley goes on to explore what it means to practice the presence of the kingdom of God in the here and now – the beauty of the kingdom in the messiness of life.

So how is the kingdom of God like a wedding celebration? Firstly I think it has to do with recognizing where we are, just as the bridesmaids were part of the wedding celebration, we need to recognize that we are living in the kingdom of God. This is God's world and God's creation. We sometimes forget that and think it is our world that we can treat as we please or even our kingdom which consists of all our individual agendas of how life should be –filled with our desires and aspirations – rather than seeing this as God's kingdom.

Secondly it has to do with recognizing our role in the kingdom of God, just as the bridesmaids had a role in keeping their lamps lit, ready to welcome the bride groom and accompanying the bride on her journey back to the groom's house. We each have a part to play in the kingdom of God.

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to hear Michael Frost speak. He has written a number of books about the Emerging Church and missional thinking in the 21st Century. He talked about the mission of the church, which he defined as 'alerting people to the reign of God through Jesus". I quite like this definition - it acknowledges that God already reigns, that God's kingdom is already here and that we are here to be the messengers of that Good News or to put it another way we are invited to be like the wise bridesmaids (or wedding attendants) shining our lamps and actively participating in the wedding celebration.

As people of faith, we need to be alert to the reign of God around us and in us and to be active in sustaining the life of faith. Keeping our lamp burning is not a 'one off' transaction – just because our lamp burned well once is no guarantee it will burn in future. Our faith needs to be a continuing part of our being.

So how do we ensure that we have a reserve of oil so our lamp light and our Christian witness in the Kingdom of God is sustained. I'd like to share 3 ways.

1. Repentance

I don't know about you but this is not a word that makes me feel comfortable. I don't like having to admit I am wrong but I think this is something I need to do often. To repent means to turn around, to stop what you're doing and do the opposite. In Mark's Gospel Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee proclaiming "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news". (Mark 1: 15). Repentance is about hope and new beginnings. In the context of Jesus' kingdom, repentance is an invitation to another world, another life, a way of being that was supposed to be all along and can be now. It's a new way of seeing God's world. And there are many things we may need to repent of – believing I am basically a good person and have no need to repent, believing that I can follow Jesus and live the life I choose as well, believing I can see the 'wrong' in others but not being able to see the wrong in my own heart. Repentance is a continual returning to God to seek God's kingdom agenda - not my own.

2. Being

When Jesus talked about the kingdom he invited his followers to see it and believe in the reality of it and join in what God was already doing in the world. We too are called to *be* kingdom people. *Being* before doing. I for one struggle with *being*, I am a do-er. But I think part of our challenge is to be alert to the kingdom of God, to be prepared, to be ready. You can't do that when you are rushed off your feet. To keep our lamp burning is to not lose our focus or get distracted and miss those opportunities to witness the kingdom of God around us.

Being means being ready to hear God speaking to us, to see God working in us and around us. *Being* is about coming to God as we are - to be nurtured and sustained in the life of faith through times of prayer, reading God's word, reflecting and remembering. As Christians we are also called to *be* in community. Not to live a life of faith in isolation but to be an encouragement and support to one another.

Today we come to the Lord's table to remember what Jesus Christ has done for us - reconciling us to God through his death. We come as we are and we are accepted and loved. We are nourished and fed. We are strengthened and sustained to go out and live as kingdom people.

3. Doing

What does it mean to live as kingdom people – alerting others to the reign of God through Christ? Michael Frost suggests we do this in two ways - through announcement and demonstration. We announce the reign of God through our worship, evangelism and personal witness. We demonstrate the reign of God through advocating for social justice, showing mercy and kindness, offering hospitality and through reconciled relationships.

Put another way we alert others to the reign of God through loving God and loving one another.

It's a very different perspective to the world. Our world is focused on self; the kingdom of God is about the other. To be participants in the kingdom of God we need to take the focus off ourselves and instead notice others, love others, pray for them and serve them. Jesus tell us in Matthew 25 what this might look like - feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and those in prison. It's also about caring for creation and not just exploiting the world's resources for our immediate needs.

But 'doing' is not something we can sustain in our own strength because before long the oil in the lamp will get used up and the light will dim. We need to remember that God is with us. And as we invite God's spirit into our lives, we will be guided in how best to use our time, our gifts and abilities and our financial resources – to love God and to love each other – and to alert people to the reign of God through Christ. Let's pray....

References

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