

Wise or foolish?

I got my tax refund last week. I could have got it much earlier, of course - had I prepared my tax return earlier. Maybe next year, I'll get it done sooner... once again this year, it wasn't too hard to do, and I reflect that I should really do it as soon as I can. I'm generally due a refund, so the sooner I lodge, the sooner I'd get my refund.

But I don't. As I've shared before, I never have. Each year, other things have come up. Other things have been more interesting. And I know I don't have to do it earlier... I don't really make a conscious decision to put it off. But I do. Every year, in the last week of October, off goes my tax return.

And I'm not alone in doing that. I couldn't find the stats for this year, but there's always a surge in lodgements in the last week of October.

I think it's a very human thing to do: To have a deadline, and to work to it. I've been working up to the Anniversary Service, and now toward the garage sale, and then after that to Advent, and then Christmas, and then a holiday in January. And so on. I mean Easter is really not that far away!

If you know anyone at school or university, well... how often do assignments get put off to the last minute? How often do people cram for a test at the last moment? In a work situation, how often do reports get put off to the last minute? In a church situation, how often is the sermon written late on a Saturday night? (As an aside, I can still honestly say I have never written a sermon on a Saturday night – but I am told it does happen.)

We like our deadlines. We like our due dates. And if we don't have those things, we find it hard. So often, people say something like "If we can just get to the end of the year, then things will be okay."

But when we know that something's going to happen, or something is going to be needed, but we don't know when, it becomes a problem – or at least it becomes stressful. Twenty odd years ago, when we were selling our house, it became stressful. Our original expectation was six to eight weeks, but eight weeks came and went without sign of a buyer (or indeed sign of the real estate agent who'd gone overseas for six weeks...).

On Wednesday, lots of people were waiting for their Optus phones to be restored. They had a reasonable expectation that they *would* be restored, but they couldn't know *when*.

Waiting is bad enough. But waiting for an uncertain period is even worse. What do we do in the meantime? How long can we realistically wait?

All of that is a very long introduction to today's parable from Matthew 25. Traditionally known as the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, but sometimes called the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. It's a strange parable... but when we start looking hard at the parables, we find that they are all a bit strange.

This particular parable tells the story of ten virgins – bridesmaids in some translations – who are waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. They all have their lamps – as was the tradition – to light the way for the bridegroom. They wait, but the bridegroom was delayed, and they nodded off.

In modern times, of course, it's usually the bride that is late – at the last wedding we had at Pymble Chapel, the bride was an hour and a quarter late... but no one waiting dozed off, because the anxiety level was way too high (the groom was putting on a brave face, but things were getting a bit tense). While it's fairly normal for the bride to be a *little* late, the consensus was anything more than half an hour was just too late. But in today's parable, it's the bridegroom who's late. In fact he's very late.

It wasn't until midnight that the cry rang out! All the virgins rush to get their lamps ready – they would have to trim the wicks so they didn't make too much smoke, and as they did so, half of them realised they had no oil left. So, obviously, the first thing to do is ask those with oil to share.

'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' (25:9)

It was midnight. The foolish virgins were going to miss out on lighting the way for the bridegroom – and miss out on the banquet. But their lamps were dry, and there wasn't enough oil for the wise bridesmaids to help out.

The foolish virgins went to try and buy some oil. It was midnight - it's hard to imagine where they could find anyone to sell them oil at that time. But finally, having bought some oil, they return to find that, in their absence, the bridegroom has arrived, and he, along with the wise virgins, have gone into the wedding banquet, and shut the door behind them.

And when the foolish virgins find they door shut, "Lord, lord, open the door for us."

And then verse 12 tells us “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’”

They had their chance. But the foolish virgins weren’t ready. And they missed out. They missed out on meeting the bridegroom. They missed on the wedding banquet.

It seems harsh. They missed out because they didn’t have enough oil. They missed out because they weren’t prepared.

It does seem harsh. It was something so minor. But sometimes it’s the minor things that cause the major problems. Do you know that old poem?

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.

For want of a shoe the horse was lost.

For want of a horse the rider was lost.

For want of a rider the battle was lost.

For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.

And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

The foolish virgins missed out on the bridegroom and the wedding banquet for want of a jar of oil.

It seems very harsh – and it is – but think about it: All the bridesmaids had the same opportunities and the only difference among them was that some were wise and some were foolish. It’s not that some could afford oil, and some couldn’t (and indeed, the foolish bridesmaids went off to buy some oil at the last minute, so we can assume that they all could afford it!).

The only difference was that some did the wise thing, and some didn’t. They all had the same opportunities, they all had the same invitation to the banquet, but some acted foolishly and they missed out.

None of the young women who waited for the bridegroom that night knew when he would arrive, but those that were wise acted accordingly. They brought jars of oil, as well as their lamps. And because they acted wisely, they were ready when the bridegroom came.

You might remember that last month, we looked at another of Jesus’ parables about a wedding banquet – this one from Matthew 22. In that parable, we heard that all were invited, but that someone who came chose not to wear the wedding robe, and was thrown out as a result. The one thrown out didn’t do the right thing – I think we can safely say that he, like the foolish virgins of today’s parable, didn’t act wisely. And he missed out on the banquet.

Finally, Jesus concludes the parable, saying “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

It would be really nice to know the day and the hour, wouldn't it? It would be nice – if you were a bridesmaid – to know when the bridegroom was going to arrive.

But for us, for Christians who await the return of Jesus, or who await the day when we will meet him when we die, we also do not know the day that that will happen.

We don't know. In fact, we can't know. Jesus said “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (Matthew 24:36)

The point is that we need to be prepared. We need to be staying faithful, always.

There is often a tension in our lives between using what we have today, and providing for the future. And there's certainly a similar tension in our churches, do we save our money for the future, or spend it today?

After all, Jesus told the parable of the rich fool who thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ “Then he said, ‘This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’” (Luke 12:17-20)

And Jesus said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

And you might think that this parable means that we need to have enough oil in the jar or enough money in the bank or enough grain in the silo to provide for the future.

But I don't think this parable is really about the need to save for a vague future, or a rainy day though. It's about the need to ensure that we're adequately provisioned for the task at hand.

In our context here at St Ives Uniting Church, we're having a garage sale next Saturday. We need to make sure we're adequately provisioned for that: We need the tables in place, we need the goods for sale sorted, we need a supply of change, we need to ensure there's tea and coffee for our volunteers... and all the rest of it.

The virgins waiting for the bridegroom needed to be adequately provisioned. A lamp without sufficient oil was useless. The bridesmaids who took their lamps and extra jars of oil understood that they needed to be prepared for the long haul, that they needed oil - fuel.

And so do we – and the fuel of our Christian lives is prayer – prayers of praise and confession and intercession .

And it's the scriptures – meditating on God's law as we heard a few weeks ago in Psalm 1.

And it's the engagement as the community of Christ – our fellowship with each other and with the wider church. Encouraging each other. Helping each other. Celebrating together.

And importantly it's also being open to the action of the Holy Spirit within our hearts and within our lives – our openness to being changed by God.

And if we're taking all that fuel into our hearts and lives, then we are being wise. We will be ready.

We are saved solely and completely by grace God...undeserved, unearned, unmerited favour. When we take it into our hearts that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, when we turn away from our sins and turn to God, we are saved.

And that is the free gift of God, and if we truly accept that free gift, then our lives will reflect that. We will wisely choose to do what God wants us to do.

We shouldn't be trying to get our houses and our lives in order the moment before Jesus arrives, or the moment before we go to meet him, but we should be ready – we should be staying faithful - even though we don't know the day or hour.

We spend so much of our lives planning for events, working to dates, working to deadlines, but there is so much uncertainty in the world and in our lives. But we can all know the sure and certain hope that Jesus gives us, even though we don't know when he will return, we can know that he will.

And we as his followers can be ready for that day, we will be wise and we will have oil for our metaphorical lamps, we will be staying faithful.

Amen.