



Parables of Jesus

The Wise and Foolish Virgins

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Numbers 21: 4–9 Matthew 25: 1–13

When the Oil Runs Out

For most of the church's history, the interpretation of Jesus' parables was quite elaborate: every detail of the text was understood to have meaning for Christian faith and practice. At one level, this simply reflected the belief that the Bible was the word of God, and that when God speaks, no detail can be without significance. But it also could claim support from the text of the New Testament itself, since on those few occasions where Jesus provides an interpretation of his parables – the parable of the sower being probably the most obvious example – he seems to treat them as allegories, in which every feature has a particular meaning.

When Christians attempted to interpret other parables along these same lines, the resulting readings were often extraordinarily intricate. For example, St Augustine treats the parable of the good Samaritan as a detailed summary of the whole history of salvation: the thieves who assail the man on the road are the devil and his agents; the Samaritan is Jesus; the binding of the man's wounds refers the healing of his sin; the beast on which he is carried signifies Jesus' flesh, which (like the animal in the story) bears the weight of our sinful lives; the inn is the church; even the two coins the Samaritan gives to the innkeeper are not ignored – Augustine suggests that they refer either to the double commandment to love God and neighbour, or to the promise of God's faithfulness in this life and the next.

All this changed a little over a century ago, thanks to the German biblical scholar Adolf Jülicher, who argued that Jesus' parables should not be understood as allegories, but rather as folksy stories that carry just a single, usually ethical, meaning, rather like Aesop's fables. So, in contrast to Augustine's reading of the parable of the good Samaritan, Jülicher argued that the various details of the story did not carry any independent significance: they merely fill out and enliven a narrative designed to communicate a simple moral: that Christians should help those in need.

And when we come to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in this evening's New Testament lesson, the text seems to give clear support to Jülicher's approach, for the climactic final verse certainly appears to reduce the point of the story to a single, simple command: 'Watch'. Yet a little further reflection shows that this just won't do. After all, if the point of the parable were the importance of keeping watch, then we would expect the story to make a clear division between those who kept watch and those who didn't. But it doesn't.

Quite the contrary, none of the virgins in the story manages to stay awake for the arrival of the bridegroom – they all fall asleep. So if what Jesus wanted was to give us a lesson in the rewards of vigilance, he doesn't seem to have chosen the most effective story to that end.

Nor is this the only thing about this parable that's puzzling. The reason we're supposed to watch is because 'ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh!' But the situation in the story is not one where the time of the bridegroom's arrival is unknown. Once again, it's just the contrary: we're given to understand that he was expected at a particular hour, and that all the virgins were ready for him – but that he was late. Under those circumstances, the virgins' falling asleep – their failure to watch – seems perfectly understandable.

And then there's the question of the oil. Clearly, we're supposed to admire the forethought of the virgins who brought an extra supply. But in light of the fact that Jesus is elsewhere pretty emphatic about the importance of giving to those in need, their refusal to help out their neighbours hardly seems something worthy of imitation. And what are we to make of their advice to 'go ... rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves'? Remember, it was midnight, and this was not the era of 24/7 shopping. No one was going to be selling oil at that hour. Indeed, if we're going to call the second group of virgins 'foolish', it arguably shouldn't be because they didn't bring enough oil in the first place, but rather because they thought they were going to be able to go out and replenish their supply in the middle of the night.

I want to pursue this point a bit further, because while the text clearly states that the second set of virgins 'went to buy' more oil, it doesn't tell us whether they succeeded in doing so – just that when they came back, the doors were shut, and they were left on the outside. And this raises a question: if the problem is that while they were away trying to buy oil, 'the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut', we can't help but wonder what would have happened if the 'foolish' virgins had just stayed put, lamps unlit, to be sure, but otherwise present to meet the bridegroom when he came?

On the standard reading of this parable, the second set of virgins are 'foolish' because they didn't bring enough oil with them – because they weren't as foresighted as the 'wise'. But if you think about it, this really doesn't make much sense. Because if it's really the case that no one knows when the bridegroom is going to come, then it's purely accidental that the 'wise' virgins happened to have enough oil: if he'd been late enough, even their supply would have given out. Moreover, since they, too, fell asleep, they were clearly no better at watching than their less well-provided companions.

So what lesson are we to take from this parable? It can't be 'Watch' in the sense of 'stay awake', because neither group of virgins succeeded in doing that. So, the final verse notwithstanding, we might be tempted to conclude that the lesson is really, 'Bring plenty of oil' – but what does that mean? And here, with all due respect to Professor Jülicher, we really can't avoid at least a little bit of allegorizing if the parable is to make any sense at all. For if it's all about having enough oil, we can't help but ask what exactly this 'oil' is that we're supposed to be bringing.

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus calls his followers, 'the light of the world', and tells them, 'Let your light so shine before [others], that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven' (Matthew 5: 14, 16). Now, in Jesus' day light meant a lamp, and a lamp could only shine if it had oil in it. So if we're the light of the world, then the oil is the fuel that keeps our lamps burning. And what is that fuel? It's not primarily food and drink,

because the light Jesus has in mind is more than just a matter of physical survival; it's about pursuing a certain way of life – a way of compassion, peacefulness, and righteousness – in the face of what he warns his disciples will be significant resistance. And for that a different kind of fuel is called for, which is more intangible, and which includes things like conviction, confidence, dedication, determination, commitment, perseverance, and resilience. For it's when these are lacking, that the light Jesus speaks of goes out.

We're at the start of the last week of term – precisely the point at which reserves of determination, confidence and resilience tend to run low. Now, if by some chance you still have a good supply in your tank, well done. But however much or little you may have right now, the hard truth is that at some point for all of us, our reserves will run dry. The oil will fail. Our lamps will go out. That's simply part of what it is to be human, and nothing will save any of us from that experience. You may think you have great reserves – and well you may. But however great they may be, they remain finite.

So what do we do when our reserves run dry? What message does this parable have for us? 'Watch!' Yes, that's its message – but we have to be very careful in explaining what it means. It evidently doesn't mean 'Stay awake!', because none of the virgins in the parable manage that. Nor can it really mean, 'Bring plenty of oil!': for precisely because we 'know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh', we can never be sure that the amount we may have on hand at any point, however great, will be enough to last till it's needed. However much any of us possesses at the moment, at some point it will go dry, perhaps at the very point when the bridegroom returns – and then where will you be?

That's the question: not 'Will I have enough oil?', but 'Where will I be?' For the problem with the 'foolish' virgins is not that they didn't bring enough oil, but that they weren't present when the bridegroom came. It was in this sense that they neglected to keep watch: not that they failed to stay awake, but that they failed to stay put. All the virgins fell asleep, but the fault of the foolish ones was that in the face of their failure to stay awake, they left, trying to find resources elsewhere in a time and place where no such resources were to be had. Their job was to watch for the bridegroom, to stay and be ready to welcome him, whether their lamps were lit or not. And it's there that they fell short.

The message that we don't know the day or the hour when the Son of man will come is not unique to this parable: the Gospels report Jesus reminding his followers of it frequently. And none of us knows how it will be with us on that day and in that hour. We may be feeling at the top of our game; or we may be utterly exhausted, laid low, drained of our last reserves of whatever it is that keeps us going. But Jesus' message remains: 'Watch!' Don't imagine that it's up to you to be ready, because the fact that we don't know the day or the hour means that it's absolutely guaranteed that, in the final analysis, none of us will be ready. But that's only a problem if we think that the One who is coming expects something of us – and that's not how it works. The bridegroom is the one throwing the party, and that means that he's promised to supply everything we need. All that's asked of us is that we be there to meet him, ready to receive the gifts he is bringing and not imagining that we need to supply them on our own.

Because what does it mean to watch? It means precisely not to look to yourself, to whatever resources you may or may not have, but to look outside yourself, to give all your attention to the One who is coming, in the confidence that however well prepared you may or may not be, even if your oil has run out, you can and should trust in that One to provide everything you need – and provide it abundantly.