

**Reflections on Matthew 25:1–13**  
**Rev. Christine Gilbert for St. Andrew's by the Sea Uniting Church**

Stay calm. Be patient.

This has been a prevailing message at least by some this week as we awaited the result of the US presidential election. But equally it summarises well, I think, something of the encouragement found in the parable of the ten bridesmaids. Stay calm. Be patient. For the fulness of time is at hand. The parable affirms that what we await is not judgement and condemnation, but celebration and joy at the consummation of love for all creation.

The wedding banquet is a prevailing image for God's realm—the fulfilment of divine justice, peace and love, the will of God done on earth as it is in heaven. Rev Dr Vicky Balabanski of the Uniting College says Matthew's kingdom of heaven is "a future reality with present impact, especially in the person of Jesus but also the mission of his disciples."

In other words, how we envision the fulfillment of time informs *how we are in the present*—what is important to us, what we love, how we relate and in what we invest ourselves.

At times, holding the kingdom of heaven before us as an inspiration and guide can feel overly idealistic and unrealistic. Our inability to embody even something of the love of Jesus within our own lives at times much less the wider world can be disheartening leading perhaps to a complete resignation. Why bother? It's all too hard! Especially as we continue to move through the pandemic's unmaking for a possible remaking, the courage, imagination, trust, and energy needed can feel overwhelming. We may be tempted simply to retreat back into the familiar or to establish prematurely, and often by human will alone, a new normal.

What comes to mind for me are the scenes of Melbournians eating and drinking in pubs just after midnight on the first day out of lockdown. Without begrudging anyone a drink with friends—a completely understandable and highly symbolic gesture—I wonder if the parable's call to be awake and ready for Christ invites us into deeper, lasting transformations of being. To return to business as usual in our personal lives and as churches seems like a missed opportunity, not to mention a possible lack of reflection on the gifts and graces that have come to us over these months.

In a pastoral note to ministers this week, Moderator Bronte Wilson said the need to adapt during lockdown revealed "opportunities for significant ministries." This has been a common theme for many churches in 2020. For example, one Presbytery colleague chose to send the worship and news mailout to those who use the church hall for so-called secular activities during the week as a way of staying connected. Many conveyed deep gratitude for the prayers and reflections and continue to converse with her around "spiritual" and personal matters now that their activities have resumed.

So, a prevailing question now is: How might what has been revealed give shape to what will be? This is especially difficult when we consider Bronte's further observation, "I realise these extra ministries have placed additional strain and stress on the leadership of congregations, which when added to the uncertainty about what the future holds, leaves many feeling exhausted and wondering how they will manage the next change." Indeed, some of us can empathise with the bridesmaids who grow drowsy in their waiting! So,



maybe amidst the fatigue and wish to settle, Teilhard de Chardin's words are helpful reminder: *Above all, trust in the slow work of God.*

As we look with hope to the future, it occurs to me the bridegroom's appearance at midnight may speak directly into our present reality. This little detail could easily slip by without notice, but it seems significant for both its irregularity and meaning. Kicking off a wedding in the middle of the night is more than unusual—then and now. It doesn't make sense. But darkness in scripture alludes to things hidden and mysterious as well as suffering and death. So perhaps this detail impresses on us even more how relevant and productive seasons of uncertainty and challenge can be within the Christian life.

The dark that comes with unknowing and hardship is a time when faith must "feel its way about," as the hymn by Elizabeth Smith puts it. Might we be invited to be poised with anticipation for the hint half guessed (T. S. Eliot), the daily glimmers of kindness and love that sparkle before us? And might our gathering of these hints and glimmers illuminate for us the manifestation of Christ in our midst, the direction in which we are called to place our hearts and efforts?

This is my growing experience. I hope it is yours and ours as well. For like the oil that cannot be shared in today's parable, each of us must take responsibility for tending our own inner journey. The response of the wise bridesmaids indicates an impossibility, then, not a lack of generosity. We must each find ways to nurture and enliven our souls, staying awake to the presence of God within and all around.

While tending to the inner life requires intention and its own kind of effort, it is not effortful—something more we must do, yet another task we must perform or get right. Instead, we are invited to rest, to be silent and still, dwelling with God, letting go of the weight of self and life, basking in the light of love. So that, in the fulness of time, we will *know as we are known* and the embrace we encounter will be deeply familiar, welcoming and eternal.

*In honour of NAIDOC week, we recognise the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This song by Archie Roach speaks of waiting, tending, longing and welcoming—themes within Matthew's parable. Archie says that as he ages, he is becoming "more interested in the universal experience of being human, rather than the details of his own personal story." In his memoir, he writes that "The Place of Fire" is a place of love and connection. In his own way, Archie draws another picture of the kingdom of heaven for us with this song.*

Oh I'm waiting here  
And I long to see your face  
For you are so near and dear to me  
Don't you realise, that we all come from this place  
Open up your eyes, look and see  
  
It's somewhere in your dreaming  
In your ancient memory  
Your spirit will no longer be alone  
You've got to start believing  
So just let your mind be free  
Oh please, will you come back home

Though the road is long  
You have got to face your fears  
And you must stay strong, to be free  
Got to find your way,  
through the heartache and the tears  
Oh and come what may, back to me

You know there will be singing  
And dancing through the night  
To have you back is all that I desire  
Back to the beginning,  
where we're basking in the light  
In the light of this place of fire

Oh I'm waiting here  
Yes I'm waiting here, back home  
Oh I'm waiting here  
In the light, in the light of this place of fire.

Listen at:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZ7SwxjRZNw&list=PLVaHSSjwIbkWY9809AXeAWkpZvCCxoVEA&index=92>