

*John Docherty, July 10, 2016*

### **The wise and foolish bridesmaids**

This parable, along with those that immediately precede it, is generally taken to refer to the need for the Christians of the “end times” to be watchful, and prepared, for the return of Christ.

The idea is that Jesus' return will happen almost without warning, at a time least expected, and in a manner that would allow for even the most faithful of disciples to be led astray.

This is how I've always heard the parable explained, in any case. Jesus is aware that there will be a long period of waiting for his return after his death, resurrection and ascension; a period of waiting that risks producing a complacency and lack of faithfulness in his followers.

So Jesus, as the thinking goes, leaves these parables behind both as a caution against laziness in following the faith and a reassurance that he *will*, in fact, return, even if it seems that the wait is intolerably long.

This is certainly the interpretation used by the two commentators I had available to me in preparation for this meditation : we are to be attentive to the signs that Jesus' return is imminent, and we are to assume that he could return at literally any moment.

But one writer I consulted has a slightly different take on this series of parables.

C.H. Dodd argues that while they may well have been understood by the Gospel writers, and by the early church, as a message for the church in the decades and centuries to come, they may well have had a slightly different intent in Jesus' original use of them.

Dodd wonders, for example, what sense Jesus' original hearers would have made of these parables. How would the thronging crowds, or the more intimate circle of disciples, have understood the meaning behind these stories of thieves in the night; of faithful and unfaithful servants; of bridesmaids unprepared for the arrival of the groom?

Dodd wonders if Jesus' initial use of this, and the other parables of this kind, is rather to warn his hearers that they should be prepared for the unexpected.

The bridesmaids in *this* parable, for example, have every expectation that the groom will arrive and that they will be invited into the marriage celebration. They know what they will need to gain admission, and they know, or think they know, more or less, when he will be likely to arrive.

But Dodd's reading of the parable is that perhaps they should not become complacent in their expectations and assume that things will play out exactly as they imagine.

It's not so much about the groom arriving later than they thought as it is about them being caught by surprise by an unexpected turn of events and being shut out altogether.

Dodd suggests that Jesus' message to his immediate hearers is that they should watch and wait for the kingdom, yes, but also that they should be prepared for a dramatic turnaround of all their expectations of what the coming of the Kingdom means.

His thinking is that Jesus is more concerned with preparing his followers for what is to come in the immediate future, in their immediate expectations of what the Kingdom of Heaven will mean for them, than he is in leaving behind cryptic messages for future generations to decode.

In other words, Jesus' hearers were looking for a Messiah who would bring reform and liberation here and now. They weren't anticipating a horrific end to this man's ministry : torture, crucifixion and death.

They weren't anticipating that their hopes would be dashed and destroyed.

So, in Dodd's view, then, these parables are Jesus' gentle way of warning them of what is to come.

And, because they are parables, stories with symbolic meaning, they are easily taken by the Gospel writers and applied to other contexts with other levels of significance.

I'm not entirely sure what to think of Dodd's reading.

I like the idea that Jesus may have had a more direct, and “practical”, concern for the people who would be directly affected by the way in which his ministry ends.

I like the idea that his parables should have had some immediate significance to his hearers and not be only understandable decades or centuries after his death.

And I *do* like the implication that life in the Kingdom of Heaven is fraught with the unexpected;

that though we might think we've got it all figured out, that the Kingdom of Heaven has a way of surprising us.

And that got me wondering about how my own understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven may have been a little complacent from time to time.

How am I prepared or unprepared for what this life of discipleship will bring?

How much do I rely on things to play out in a fairly predictable way as I muddle along in my understanding of faithfulness, and how does it affect me when the unexpected happens?

How do I expect God to be present to me in a daily way, and how might I be oblivious to how God is present around me?

For example, when I came to faith as a young adult, I embraced a particular vision of the Kingdom of Heaven that painted a picture of believers who were all respectful of each other and engaged in building healthy, loving relationships.

It's a vision that's captured to some extent in the second verse of the hymn we sang a few minutes ago (HWB #407) : "We are people of God's peace".

That verse reads as follows :

"We are children of God's peace in this new creation,  
spreading joy and happiness, through God's great salvation.  
Hope we bring in spirit meek, in our daily living.  
Peace with ev'ry one we seek, good for evil giving."

It strikes me as a kind of hippy-like picture of life as a Christian : spreading joy and happiness and living in peace with everyone we meet.

I've since discovered that this vision of the Kingdom is only partially right.

Yes, this is the ideal we strive for, but I've come to believe that this "new creation" we are promised is more of a chance for a fresh start than a fait accompli.

Our embrace of the Kingdom of Heaven is not so much a guarantee of perfect living, with wise choices the order of the day, as it is the promise of a space for growth and struggle with certain risks and joys associated with being in community.

This has been a stretching experience for me.

And you?

How prepared or unprepared are *you* for life in the Kingdom of Heaven?

What expectations have been turned upside down for you?