

## **Sermon on Matthew 25: 1-13**

### **People Get Ready**

**In 1965, and drawing on the characteristics of the Gospel tradition out of which he came, Curtis Mayfield recorded a song called 'People Get Ready'.**

People get ready, there's a train comin'.  
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board.  
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'.  
You don't need no ticket, you just get on board.

Mayfield later said:

*"That was taken from my church or from the upbringing of messages from the church. Like there's no hiding place and get on board, and images of that sort. I must have been in a very deep mood of that type of religious inspiration when I wrote that song."*

It was the 60s and the civil rights movement was in full swing and the theme of the song 'people get ready, there's a train comin'...' , suited the time well.

But like a lot of spirituals it also has that eschatological edge to it.

That sense that there was a message here about the things of eternity, as well as the things of earth.

People get ready for the train to Jordan.  
It's picking up passengers from coast to coast.  
Faith is the key, open the doors and board 'em.  
There's hope for all among those loved the most.

Ironically, it has become something of a popular anthem, recorded by a myriad of different artists.

Versions have emerged from the likes of Bob Dylan, Sting, The Blind Boys of Alabama, Human Nature, Rod Stewart, Eva Cassidy.

I wonder sometimes if they know what they're singing??

I even did a cover of it at a college retreat once!

Something's going to happen soon, we better be ready, there's a train comin'.

**When I was at school, perhaps like a lot of schools, we used to put on school musicals.**

One year we did the Gilbert & Sullivan comic opera, 'Trial by Jury'.

We had, at that time, a deputy head who was a masterful pianist called David.

An utterly proficient, thoughtful, and gifted player who was playing for the show.

In the middle of one of the performances, another teacher who had one of the main parts, forgot his lines.

The look on his face gave it away as the conductor quietly prompted him.

He began to sing again and the show went on.

In the time it took him to forget his lines and be re-prompted, however, probably 5 or 6 extra bars of music had needed to be played as everyone waited for him to carry on, including David at the piano of course.

When he started to sing again, if you had been listening to the music, you would not have known anything had happened.

David just played on as if he had known this little unforeseen interruption was coming.

It was seamless.

When the vocal began again, the music followed on just as it needed to and the show went on to finish successfully.

When that moment of uncertainty came, David was prepared.

Not because he knew what was coming or when.

Not because he knew how long it would last, or what, specifically, he would need to do at that moment.

But because all his life of practice and playing, all the experience he had behind him, meant that there was a preparedness for *whatever* might eventuate.

He was ready.

And at the crisis moment, it showed.

And a moment that could have seen the whole show crumble was smoothed over without so much as a twitch of insecurity.

**We can never escape the utter strangeness of the Bible.**

Nor the searching truth of Jesus it unfolds.

In the case of a parable like the ten bridesmaids it's doubly so in both its form and content.

To begin with, the content of the story is so remote to us.

Marriage customs in the ancient Middle East are pretty foreign to our modern sensibilities.

Ten bridesmaids need to wait for the groom late at night, quite why we're not really sure, but it seems they needed to accompany him in some way to the banquet.

All ten fall asleep when the groom is late.

When he does arrive, at midnight, only five have sufficient oil to burn their lamps.

The wise bridesmaids won't share their oil with the foolish (which kind of calls into question their wisdom somewhat), so the foolish ones are forced to go and fetch some of their own.

By the time they return, the wedding feast is already well under way and even at their insistent knocking, the door won't be opened to them.

**In its context in Matthew's gospel, this parable is clearly a warning to the primitive church to be ready for when the Son of Man returns, 'the bridegroom', Jesus the Lord.**

It's asking the church to anticipate the great future event of the Kingdom's fulfillment, by living faithfully in the present.

Unlike in other parables which begin, 'the kingdom of heaven is like', in this case it's future tense.

'At that time', Jesus begins, 'the kingdom of heaven *will be like*'.

At what time?

The time when Jesus returns, when the kingdom comes, when God sets all things to right.

People get ready, there's a train comin'.

The wise are those who are prepared, the foolish, unprepared.

For Matthew, the implication of unpreparedness is judgment.

The door is shut.

The foolish bridesmaids can't come in to share in the wedding feast.

Adding to the strangeness, the conclusion doesn't quite seem to fit the story.

'Keep awake...', Jesus says.

Yet *all ten* of the bridesmaids fell asleep, wise and foolish.

It's the unpreparedness of the foolish bridesmaids that sets up the moral to the story.

People get ready is the message.

When the moment comes, are we prepared in order to keep on playing the right tune?

**And it's a parable of course.**

It's already obscure, and in this case made more so by the strange and ancient context of its content.

I was reading a book this week by Richard Lischer which pointed out how parables are wholly anachronistic in our public discourse today.

'Imagine the chairman of the Federal Reserve', Lischer suggests, 'answering a question on economic policy by saying, 'There was a man who went out to sow seed in his field...''

Today we want sound bites neatly parceled rather than strange, dislocating stories of the imagination which draw us into truth sideways.

Lischer quotes the preacher Fred Craddock who distills the problem succinctly.

'A father comes in to read his child a bedtime story and says, 'Daddy is too busy to tell you the story of Red Riding Hood tonight. But he can tell you the point instead.'

We haven't got time for stories and their illuminating mysteries.

It's one of the great things about coming to church.

You might find the preaching monotonous, you may not know all the hymns, you may prefer the little cups in communion, but at least it's a place where we take the time to read aloud the strange stories of Jesus as if they have something important to say to us.

Which they do.

We let them swirl around in our imagination a bit and, hopefully, set off thoughts which help us peer into the mystery of God and the mystery of ourselves.

This certainly makes us unusual in our modern world.

As Lischer points out, in Matthew's gospel, only a little less than half of everything Jesus says is through parables.

In Luke it's over half, so parables are here to stay if you're a Christian.

Ironically, given the one we've read today, maybe being prepared to slow down a bit in our 24/7 world and listen, and imagine what truth God might be opening up to us, is part of being faithful?

Part of a counter-narrative to the world's way of doing things?

**So, the church is called to be ready.**

To be awake.

To be prepared for when its Lord might return.

But this is surely not just in relation to the final consummation of the Kingdom, but to where God might be calling us in the here and now.

The Kingdom is among us, and drawing us out of our self manufactured comfort zones in new directions.

Are we prepared for that kind of call?

Has our faith over perhaps many decades, set us ready to walk with Jesus into a new future?

A future which sees the past, not as an idol to worship itself, but as a resource which assists us to imagine God's new way?

The trouble with the church generally, I think, is that we confuse being ready, being prepared for the movement of the Spirit, with a kind of overly conservative caution.

There's a show on television called 'Doomsday Preppers'.

This is where people with a certain level of paranoia about any number of imagined threats, 'prepare' themselves by storing up food and supplies in massive quantities.

So, they have these great vats of flour and water and other things waiting for the fateful day to come when the disaster hits and then they will be able to feed themselves.

Too often the church's preparation for God's calling into a new Kingdom day looks something like this.

As it happens, on Friday I was talking to a person from another part of the UCA who was describing how all the ministry staff in a certain area were being slowly put off.

Don't you have any money? I asked.

Yes, we have a million dollars of reserves.

I looked at him incredulously and inquired, well, why don't you start to use that then?

People want to hold onto it for a rainy day, he said with a certain resignation in his voice as if to say, these same people can't see that it's already raining outside.

The line between faithful prudence and unfaithful timidity can be thin sometimes.

When the train comes, you need to get on board or it will leave you behind.

When the bridegroom arrives you better have oil for your lamps.

When the singer forgets his lines, you better have practiced all those many hours so you can continue on without missing a beat.

When Jesus calls us to follow, we better be prepared to go.

People get ready.

**We better keep on praying.**

Keep on loving.

Keep on serving.

Keep on seeking to allow ourselves to be shaped and moved by the story of God's love told to us in Scripture and embodied in Jesus Christ.

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning as the old Gospel chorus used to say.

Truly being a 'good news' people.

A people who, if you knew nothing about the Christian faith, might inspire in you a new vision of what's important and meaningful in the world.

A people who are ready to live for a vision of truth beyond ourselves, yet that is deeply implanted in our lives at the same time.

A people who call others to faith in Christ and by our witness show the world that faith in Christ is what we're all called to.

A people who love the poor and welcome the stranger.

A church for all people, listening for the Spirit.

Do this, and we'll be ready.

Our lamps will burn brightly.

We'll be prepared for wherever God is leading our church, and we'll seek to participate in his working.

To be his instruments.

And finally we'll be prepared for when God sets everything to right.

When there is no more pain and suffering.

When there is only love and peace and joy remaining, a new heaven and a new earth.

When the Kingdom of heaven comes in all its power and glory, in the form of our risen, crucified Lord.

I'm not prepared to say when that day might be, 'you do not know the day or hour', Jesus says.

But I do hope we can all be prepared.

Amen.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Note: the book I've referenced in this sermon is, *Reading the Parables*, by Richard Lischer, an 'Interpretation Commentary', (2014), Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky.