

Exploring Scripture for Nov 12, 2023
Matthew 25:1-13
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We return to the Gospel of Matthew for the final weeks of this lectionary cycle. This gospel was written late in the first century after the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. It was originally written for a new Jewish Christian community, comprised of Jews who now claimed Jesus as the Messiah and had broken away from the traditional Jewish faith. The 25th chapter focuses on the question of judgment: what will happen when the Messiah returns to the world. It contains two parables – the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, and the Parable of the Talents – and the final Great Judgment. Today we focus on the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids.

In this parable, there are ten women serving as bridesmaids for a wedding party. One of the traditions for weddings in that time was for the bridesmaids to meet the bridegroom when he left his home to meet the bride. The bridesmaid would then process with the groom to the wedding ceremony and then return to his home for the wedding party that followed. These ten are split into two groups: five wise ones who brought extra oil for their lamps and five who did not. When the bridegroom is delayed, they all fall asleep awaiting his arrival. When he does arrive, the five foolish bridesmaids beg the five wise ones for oil as their lamps flicker out. But the five wise women refuse, telling them to go to the market to purchase more. While they have gone to purchase more oil, the groom arrives, and the remaining five bridesmaids are ushered into the wedding party, while the five who were unprepared are locked out.

Like other parables in this Gospel, this is an allegory. The Bridegroom is Jesus returning to the world in the final days of judgment, and the ten bridesmaids represent his followers anticipating his return to complete the realization of the Kingdom of Heaven. Most early Christians assumed that the Son of Man would return in their lifetimes, but as time progressed, a generation had passed. Therefore, the return of Jesus was delayed, just as the bridegroom is in the story. The lesson is found in the last line of the parable: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (25:13). It is a teaching for us to be aware and prepared, for we cannot predict when the time of reckoning is at hand.

Here have a new community of faith that has separated from orthodox Judaism to follow the teachings of Jesus. The community adds Gentiles to their new church, and together they wait for the return of Christ to finish the work of realizing God’s reign on earth. Yet their expectations are changed because Jesus has not returned yet. Now the church has to shift its thinking: what do we do until Christ returns?

Questions for Reflection:

- 1) What are we called to do as the Church while waiting for Christ’s return?
- 2) What does Christ’s return mean for you?