

What It Means To Be Prepared

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[0 : 01] It's like this. There's a story of what the kingdom of God is compared to. And ten young women, ten maidens, ten virgins, five wise and five foolish.

And they are bidden to the wedding and they await the wedding. And the wedding happens not at the prescribed time engraved on the card.

But it happens when the bridegroom has had enough of this partying and heads out through the streets of the city to claim his bride.

And a little procession goes with him. And so there's a great cry in the night as this procession goes down the street. And the ten young women are asked to join.

So that's the kind of picture that Jesus gives. And he points out that five were wise because they took with them a flask of oil.

[1 : 05] And five were foolish because when the time came, their lamps were dry. And this then, this word from Matthew 25, verses 1 to 13, is that part of scripture around which we are together this morning.

In other words, there's the scripture and we're gathered around it. And we have to find communion with God through this scripture.

This is a communion service. Not because we're going to serve the sacrament of bread and wine, but because communion for Christians is as they gather around and feed on the word of God.

And the sacrament of bread and wine is to illustrate how this happens, to actually do it.

So we are gathered to find communion with one another and with God as we gather around this word.

[2 : 19] And this word is the parable of the five wise and the five foolish virgins. The point of gathering around is that we may have oil for our lamps.

In other words, that we may find a resource here which will provide for us. This is the source that we have to go to.

I don't know how prepared you are for Christmas. The possibility is that even if you are moderately well prepared, you don't feel that well prepared.

And you're full of anxiety and misgivings about your unpreparedness. And Jesus is telling you about unpreparedness. What it means to be genuinely unprepared.

Now, the difficulty I think is that we live in the midst of a bewildering array of information.

[3 : 29] And if we could know all there is to know on any given subject and bring all that there is to know on any given subject to bear on the particular problems of our day, we would have all the answers to life.

And the difficulty is that there is so much more to know than your brain or mine can begin to absorb. We simply can't do it. You know, the idea that you can educate people to the point where everybody can have all they need to know to meet with every situation just doesn't work.

We can't absorb that much information. We have to have something to guide us because we're drowned by information. In the same way that we are drowned by the demands that Christmas makes on us and we have this feeling of anxiety.

So, in our world, we are drowned by information. How do we educate our children? What do we do about health? How do we govern nations and provinces and cities?

All those things. There's countless. I mean, there's a super abundant supply of information, but we don't know how to bring it to bear on our situation. And so, we see that all the help is there, all the resources are there, but our ability to take hold of them is seriously impaired.

[4 : 56] That's how we live our lives. And Christ recognizes that when he tells this story. There's famine in Ethiopia, war in Panama, civil war in Romania, the crumbling of the Marxist world, the

problem of unemployment, the sexual revolution, the limits of greed.

All these problems bombard our lives daily, and we are compelled to retreat into our private world and try to make some small area of ordered meaning and purpose within which we can live our lives.

And to us comes this word of God concerning the person of Jesus Christ and his teaching. You see, it's not what you know in terms of the amount of information available to you, because we now live where there is far more information than we could process if we had, we live ten times over. We simply couldn't absorb it all. So it's not a matter of what you know. Life consists in living in relationship to Jesus Christ.

It's living in that personal relationship and absorbing all that we can from knowledge, but we can't live our lives that way. We can't decide how to deal with our lives in that way.

[6 : 26] Now, Jesus recognizes this, and so he comes along to teach us, to teach us as a group of people how to live our lives. You may think that the best way to do it is to go to a mountain in the Himalayas, find a holy man, and have him tell you how to live the holy life.

And you spend the rest of your life in the mountains of the Himalayas trying to do it. But what Jesus is saying is, he's saying to people like you and me, gathered as we are now, maybe in a church, maybe on a hillside, but a great many people.

And the way Jesus wanted them to grow and mature spiritually was by asking them lots of questions, giving them very few answers. So he comes to us, and he says, tells us the story of the prodigal son, and says, now, are you the elder brother, or are you the prodigal son?

He doesn't tell you the answer. Your own heart alone can tell you what the answer to that is. He can ask you, are you Mary, or are you Martha, when he tells us the story of their home.

He can ask you, are you Lazarus, you know, with a body full of sores and the afflictions of poverty, or are you divas, who bears sumptuously every day?

[7 : 50] He asks you to consider that. He asks you, are you among the wheat, or are you among the tares? What are you doing here anyway? Are you wheat, or are you tares?

He asks you, are you a Pharisee, who prayed thus with himself, I thank God that I'm not as other people are, or are you a publican, who can say, God be merciful to me, a sinner?

Where are you in the range between those two? Those are the questions Jesus asks us. Are you a barn builder, you know, that you have to accommodate the vast accumulation of wealth you have, or do you recognize that the whole of your life is summarized in one hour, ultimately?

That's the hour at which you meet God. Are you a priest, a Levite, or a good Samaritan? You have to ask yourself those questions.

You've got to ask yourself, if somebody gave you \$10,000 in trust, what would you do with it? Would you bury it, or would you put it on the stock market?

[9 : 09] You'll have to work that one out, I don't know. Then, all these stories give us kind of cross-references by which we can identify who we are as persons.

That's how Jesus teaches us. Well, then, in this section of Matthew's gospel, he gives us what are called by one person, the parables of crisis, and he says there's four of them.

There's one about the faithful and the unfaithful servant. The, are you faithful or are you unfaithful? And he gives you the picture. Supposing you were left with a wonderful house, with every provision that you could possibly want, and told that it was in trust to you until the master returned, what would you do?

Jesus suggests if you were a faithful servant, you would stay ready for the master's return. If you were a non-faithful servant, you'd have a bash. And, just let it go.

Then he says you could be, he gives another parable of crisis about the waiting servant, what happens for them. And this is the one who's, the lord of the manor has gone off to get himself a bride, and he's coming back sometime, and when he comes, are you going to be ready?

[10 : 35] He says that's another picture of your life as to how you can relate to the bridegroom who is Christ. He says there's another crisis which could take place, and that is a thief will come in the night, and it's an inevitable but unpredictable event.

And are you prepared for the inevitable but unpredictable in your own life? Well, then he tells the story of the wise and foolish virgins.

Wednesday morning at the men's Bible study, we really got into this in quite a good way, quite an exciting way, and I think probably it's not meant for preachers like me to stand up here and tell you

what this parable means, because most of it draws on the experiences of our daily life. were it not for the fact that Anglicans don't do such things, we would probably be far better to form circles of six people and go into this parable ourselves and share the wisdom that God has given you in the course of living your life as to what this parable means. And one of the things that occurred to me on Wednesday morning when we thought about it is that I think our world has turned the parable around, and the foolish virgins are really the wise ones and the wise ones are really the foolish ones. [11 : 59] And I worked it out this way subsequently that the foolish are wise because they've come to understand the hard reality that there's nothing to wait for, it's all here right now, so take advantage of it.

They have come to realize that the state is responsible for my welfare, and therefore if there's any shortages, it's the politicians who are at fault. And they've come to realize that if I have any needs, I've always got my friends to rely on.

I don't know if you've ever lost your job and turned to your friends and seen how sympathetic they are. They can't even quite remember your name. It's a very tenuous structure that you're relying on if that's what you're relying on.

But anyway, that's what they decide. We can all get together and solve any problem we want by sharing. The only time there is is now.

And why get in such a state over marriage anyway? I just threw that one in at the end because I thought it would be appropriate. That, you know, that that really is the kind of wisdom that we have acquired.

[13 : 28] There's nothing to wait for. The state is responsible for my welfare. My friends will look after me if I'm in trouble. The only time is now. Why make a fuss over marriage anyway?

Well, that's the wisdom of our world. And the church looks foolish. The church looks foolish because it says these things.

If you read this parable carefully, it says there is another kingdom. This is not all there is. The only way you understand life, the only way you truly understand what life is all about, if you know that it isn't all there is, you've got to know a reality beyond this.

Another kingdom. The New Testament says the present world is not all there is. Life is not to be lived second hand.

Everybody must go to the source for themselves. Really hard work. The way we've set up the church is that just as the doctor goes to the books to know how to heal us, so the minister goes to the books to figure out how to tell us to live.

[14 : 45] And so us ministers tell you how to live. But the only way to live, in fact, is that you go to the source yourself. Nobody can do it for you.

You must go to the source yourself. That's what our mission in January is all about. is to put you in touch with the source. You know, because lots of people, as we learned on Wednesday morning, lots of people live second hand religion.

They don't know Christ for themselves, but they know people who do, and they like to relate to them. But the truth of this parable is that you've got to go to the source for yourself.

The other great wisdom about this life that's in that parable is you can find out too late what life is all about. There's a lot of people living without the recognition that they're going to find out too late what it's all about.

There's a lovely thing in Job 29 where Job was in his great days. He said, Job picks up the discourse and says, Oh, that I wear as in the months of old, the days when God watched over me as I knew, when his lamp shone upon my head and by his light I walked through darkness.

[16 : 07] I was in my autumn days when the friendship of God was upon my tent, when the Almighty was yet with me, when my children were about me, when my steps were washed with milk and the rock poured out for me streams of oil.

Tremendous picture of prosperity. Job says, Oh, for those days. But, those aren't all the days of our life. That was a season in Job's life as he later found out.

And, we have to recognize that that you can't, that you can't, that you can find out too late what life is all about.

I think one of the things that precipitates old age is the profound disappointment of finding out what life is all about. I think you tend to bend a little bit then and become a little bit sad.

And, that wish that you'd known what life was all about earlier. And, had done something about it earlier. But, that's the way we work.

[17 : 20] Well, that's what, that's the sort of contrast. We consider the church's wisdom to be foolishness, talking about another kingdom. Talking about the fact that this world is not all there is. Talking about life not being lived second hand. That is, you must go to the source yourself. And, talking about finding out too late what life is all about.

Church isn't very popular. The New Testament isn't very popular for saying those things. But, they come from Christ himself. They're what's at the source. See, our world is in very real trouble now. you, you could look at our world and say, it will try almost any solution but faith in God. There's a, an article on yesterday's Globe and Mail, the food bank doesn't work.

Now, it would be nice if the food bank worked and solved all the problems, but after several years, the food bank isn't working. One of the statements in that article is that people require dignity.

[18 : 33] where does that dignity come from? Well, I suggest to you that that dignity comes from who you are in relationship to God. That's your dignity.

It doesn't matter where you are on the social scale or the economic scale. Your dignity comes from that relationship to God. There's a, there's a lovely story with which I quit.

A lovely story in 1 Kings 17. about Jesus as the source of the oil. Now, listen to it.

It's 1 Kings 17. Elijah the Tishbite said to him, he's disappeared.

Okay, it's now in verse 8 following. Verse 10. So he arose and went to Zarephath, and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks, and he called to her and said, bring me a little water in a vessel that I may drink.

[19 : 44] This is Elijah talking to the widow woman who is gathering sticks. And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.

And she said, as the Lord lives, I have nothing. Baked, only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a cruise.

And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.

And Elijah said to her, fear not, go and do as you have said, but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make for yourself and your son.

For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, the jar of meal shall not be spent, and the cruise of oil shall not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.

[20 : 50] And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not spent, neither did the cruise of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spoke to Elijah.

And that's basically what Jesus says to us, that we go to him and he says, he, like Elisha, you know, I mean, Elisha doesn't look very good in this story, saying to a widow woman that is collecting enough together to have her last meal with her son before they die, he says, give me first.

Most of us don't understand Jesus when he says, give me first. Put me first in your life. And when the woman did that, then she was provided for through all the family.

And when we do that, we find the resource of oil that we need in the same way. The resource comes to us as we live in obedience to Jesus Christ.

Not when we master all there is to know about life, which we could never do anyway. But when we come to the place where in obedience to Jesus Christ we put him first, we depend then upon his promise and his word.

[22 : 22] He becomes for us the resource that we need. And so when the cry comes at midnight, we have oil for our lamps.

we have what is required. So I hope that you will take that parable and think about it. Think about how our world has turned it around backwards.

And think about the fact that you and I need to go to the source. Jesus is the source. We need to have a relationship to him.

Put him first in our lives. Of course, the celebration of Christmas is a huge, great, big, wide-open celebration of Christ's coming to be to us all that we need.

Amen. Our offertory hymn is 195. 85. Amen. God bless, many.

[23 : 50] Thank you. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

[28 : 01] Amen. Amen.

Amen. Let us pray.

on this Christmas Eve we pray for the world we thank you that you sent your son unnoticed by most to a stable in a poor Middle Eastern village to be the king of the world we lift up hearts full of gratitude for the changes in Eastern Europe for those who are experiencing new liberty we pray that they may turn in this Christmas season to the one who did the newest and most truly liberating of all things we pray for conflict-wrapped countries around the world for Romania for Panama for other areas where violence reigns in this time of peace we pray as fellow sinners for those many leaders who have led wicked lives of corruption and the abuse of power whatever their physical fate bring them true repentance in you and your salvation we pray for your church in all the world that your message of new birth can ring out in this season of your son's birth give strength to those many Christians still under persecution remind those in your church who suffer for you of your eternal care as shown in the birth of your son we pray for those who will travel to be with family and friends in this season and we lift up families gathering here and around the world to celebrate your birth take these crucial flawed joyful painful times

Lord and make them yours and make all your children more fully yours through them we pray for St. John's for every one of us here for those who took the time to find the perfect present for someone they love help them to see through that act the God who gave even his son for those who feel guilty about what they haven't done or have done poorly give them peace as they remember that you came to redeem us in all that we do wrong and all that we fail to do well for those who find Christmas the most depressing time of the year the lonely the bereaved the abused the ill the unemployed meet them through the special and tender ministrations of your spirit and bring them joy in you even if they feel no joy in other ways and through all these things in these few days prepare us for the coming of your kingdom finally we close in thanksgiving we think just now of Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem we think of three wise men on the road just because of a star and in our hearts we join them we make that same trip to stand in awe overwhelmed by our gratitude for the miracle of perfect love in infant form in your mercy

Lord your heart please be seated for the announcements good morning and welcome to you all this very beautiful Christmas Eve day we want to especially welcome two groups of people those who normally call Vancouver home but who live elsewhere and who have come home for the holidays I see some faces that I recognize the other group are people who live elsewhere but who have come to Vancouver to celebrate Christmas with us family and friends we welcome you both and hope that you all come over for a cup of tea or coffee after the service and we'll get reacquainted or get to know you for the first time on Thursday evening this coming you may want to take a break from all the football and basketball telecasts and watch a very special program that a number of our young people in this church would be of interest the Sail and Life

[35 : 27] Training Society commonly known as SALTS has a CBC special at 6.30 on December 28th that's Thursday at 6.30 this particular program will air for half hour the maiden voyage of the schooner Pacific Swift which sailed from here to the South Pacific and the highlights of this will include the changes in the lives of the young people who crewed the square ship rig from British Columbia to Australia and then back again incidentally you might know that one of our congregation members Laura Bennett is on board that boat that very boat right now off the coast of Central America so it's something we have a particular local interest so I bring that to your attention 6.30 on Thursday the 28th services this evening and tomorrow are as follows tonight at 7pm there will be the Christmas Eve pageant at which our

Sunday school members are practicing diligently for so be here for 7 o'clock at 11pm Holy Communion and with carols and tomorrow Christmas Day there will be a 10am Family Communion service now we invite you to join one or more of these services to celebrate the birth of Christ and the true meaning of Christmas in the meantime Merry Christmas to you all a recessional hymn 223 a recessional hymn 223 a recessional hymn