

Today is my wedding anniversary - 26 years, and here we are reading a story about another wedding.

But unlike my wedding day, this is a wedding where everything seems to go wrong. The groom shows up so late that the bridal party falls asleep by the side of the road. When the groom finally arrives at midnight, half the bridesmaids have forgotten to bring enough oil for their lamps and end up banned from the celebration. As the story concludes, the rejected bridesmaids are standing outside the door asking for admission, but to no avail. They have been shut out from the wedding banquet. It is a sad, strange ending to what should have been a most joyful occasion.

Here Jesus is providing us with an illustration of his second coming. But there's one phrase in verse 10 that is so striking, and it's this - "And the door was shut." It's very final isn't it. The door is shut, it's locked, and it's not opening again. Those on the inside are safe, those on the outside will never ever get the chance again to get in.

And this story reminds us that there is a door to heaven. God through his grace, displayed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ provides the door to everlasting life. Anyone, anywhere, anytime can go in that door and find new life, salvation, forgiveness, freedom, and eternal life. And that's the good news, but Jesus was also warning of the repercussions of pretending that the door, the opportunity is there forever.

You know, yesterday I visited a care home to see one of our elderly parishioners. She was completely deaf; all my communication with her was done with a white board, writing everything down for her. But her responses in a very loud voice will live with me for the rest of my life. She kept saying, "Jonny, what can we do to ensure those who don't know the Lord can hear it? What can I do in my old life to share the joy that I have of knowing him?"

And in this same week on Thursday I will conduct the funeral service of a dear lady, Maisie Moore, who in her last words to me told me that she wasn't frightened about the end. She said it was a release, and that paradise was coming.

There's 2 examples of people who know that the door is open presently for their admittance at the wedding banquet.

Now in order to catch the impact of this story, we need to know something about first-century Jewish wedding customs. In those days you got married in three stages. First, there was the formal engagement. Some months later (up to a year or more) came the formal religious ceremony in the bride's home. And then third, there was a wedding banquet (or feast) at the groom's home. That banquet took place sometime after the formal ceremony, usually at night. And in certain cases that "banquet" could last up to seven days, it was a major social event where everyone wanted to attend. When it was time for the banquet, the groom would take his bride and together they would walk to the groom's house. The road before them would be lit with lamps held aloft by the wedding party. The bridesmaids would take part in this ceremony of welcoming the bridegroom (and the bride, though she is not mentioned in the parable) as he prepared to come for the banquet. It would be a major breach of etiquette for anyone in the wedding party not to be by the road ready to welcome the bridegroom. So that's the background of this story.

And so in the context of our reading, the bridesmaids are by the road waiting for the groom to appear. When he is delayed, they all fall asleep. At midnight someone shouts the good news, "Behold, the bridegroom is coming!" The virgins wake up and prepare to relight their lamps, which had gone out while they slept. Five of the virgins had brought extra oil and so could relight their lamps. Five had no extra oil. When the first group asked to borrow some from the other five virgins, they were refused. While they went off to buy some oil, the bridegroom appeared and the five virgins whose lamps were lit went in with him to start the party. The door was shut by the time the other five virgins returned. Here is the sad end of the story, "Later the

others also came. ‘Sir! Sir!’ they said. ‘Open the door for us!’ But he replied, ‘I tell you the truth, I don’t know you’” (Matthew 25:11-12).

You see all of this is meant to teach us that some people will be ready and others won’t be ready when Jesus returns to the earth.

And so from this little parable we can draw a number of important spiritual lessons.

First - Every Sunday 2 churches gather – Christ Church and St John’s. Across the town, many people gather in churches big and small. But just because people go to church it doesn’t mean they are truly born again. People come to church for all sorts of reasons, some good and some not so good. People come because of family ties, to see their friends, to get out of the house, because they like the music, in order to impress people, or because of a feeling of guilt or obligation or because they think they can gain favour with God by being in church. Not all of those things are bad in themselves but any of them or all of them can be excuses that keep you from coming to Christ for salvation. Going to church is good; coming to Christ is better. Being baptized is good; being born again is better. Giving money is good; giving your heart to Jesus is better. Being religious is good; knowing Christ as Saviour and Lord is better. People can be one of many denominations but still not be a true Christian.

Next – we see that the foolish virgins ask the wise virgins to borrow some of their oil. The refusal may seem selfish and unkind unless you understand the situation. To loan the oil would mean that no one would have enough oil. And the point is this - no one can “borrow” another person’s faith. You can’t get into heaven by living near a saved person, or have an association with a tradition. A relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ is very personal – it’s one to one. You must believe in Jesus on your own, for yourself, not relying on the faith of those around you.

Thirdly - The foolish virgins forgot to bring extra oil and then went out to buy some oil. By the time they got back, the door was closed. It was too late! For many people, I think they believe that will live forever. Or the issue of making a decision, can come another day, but not just yet. This is a very dangerous game of roulette to play, because none of us knows what this afternoon will bring never mind tomorrow. I’m sure all of us can think of people and situations where a sudden death or illness brought to reality the finality of life. Do not say, “Someday I’ll come to Christ.” Don’t wait for “someday.” And if you have family at home today who you know don’t have the personal relationship that I’m talking about today, then return home and plead with them to do something today.

Finally, we see the five foolish bridesmaids plead at the door: “Let us in, sir. You invited us. We’re sorry we were late.” And from inside comes the solemn reply: “I never knew you.” Consider those young women. They thought they were his friends to the very end. They were never his enemies and they thought they were ready to meet him but they weren’t. In the same way many people will be tragically surprised in that day when they present the outward signs but inside is empty, and the Lord will say, “I never knew you.”

And what makes this even more tragic is that nowhere were these bridesmaids considered as bad people, and it is clear that they truly wanted to see the bridegroom. 5 were inside and 5 were outside. They were all the same on the outside, but inwardly 5 were prepared, and 5 weren’t.

Folks, when I was instituted nearly 7 years ago to this parish, I was given what is called the Cure of the Souls. That means it is my responsibility to point everyone to the Lord, but the decision to then follow lies with each individual. If today you truly are not on the right side of the door then make the choice to accept the Lord Jesus as your saviour today – not tomorrow – today. And if you have family (husbands, wives, daughters, sons, grandchildren) or friends who are not part of a church family, who are not actively committed to follow the Lord Jesus, then go home and tell them to make the decision right away. You can lead them to the Lord today. Their very life depends on it. As we look at the state of this world, it’s clear that the door is only open for a little while longer. The Lord is returning soon.