

Sermon: Will we be ready?

The second coming of our Lord is taught in the Scriptures, and it is given to stir up our hearts to greater dedication and passion in our service to God. The sad thing is that this doctrine has also been the cause of much bitter conflict and contention among Christians, particularly as believers argue for their own views regarding the exact sequence of events.

Some may get a little too carried away with all the details that we lose sight of the more crucial concern for us as Christians: How we should be living now, in the light of Christ's soon return. What should we be doing now if we know that Christ may come soon?

Some of the best guidelines for living in anticipation of Christ's coming can be found in the parables that Jesus told on this subject.

Today's parable has an interesting setting, one which is familiar to most of us: the setting of a wedding celebration. The ten virgins were participants in the wedding. This unique setting of the parable has great significance.

There are several good reasons why the second coming of the Lord Jesus should be described here in the form of a wedding celebration.

First, marriage appropriately portrays the close relationship that exists between Jesus Christ and his church. God has chosen the highest and closest of all human relationships - the marriage relationship - to portray our bond with him. Thus, Christ is the husband or groom, and the church is the wife or bride of Christ.

And the love and commitment between Christ and the church is very much like the marital love and commitment that exists between bride and groom.

How eagerly we now wait for the time when our beloved bridegroom will appear in all his majestic glory and take us up to his heavenly home!

Jesus gave this wonderful promise: 'In My Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.'

The second reason why Christ's return is like a wedding day, is that marriage is an event that is marked by happiness and rejoicing. Even in the weddings we are invited to attend, we can see the happiness of the bride's and groom's families, so warmly expressed in all the smiles, hugs, handshakes, and the often lavish expenses for the wedding decorations and dinner.

But of course, no happiness on the wedding day can be greater than that of the bride and groom, who are the ones joined together as man and wife, for this is the day they had been so earnestly waiting for!

In the same way, we too should be earnestly expecting and waiting for the happy day when our Lord Jesus Christ will come. In a real sense, the day of Christ's return will be a 'wedding day' for us, the day when we will be forever in the presence of our beloved Redeemer, and we will enter into the Joy of our Lord.

For us who are redeemed by Christ, there is no greater happiness than to be in the presence of Jesus Christ.

The third reason why Christ's return is like a wedding day for us is that it involves our making preparations for it. We are all aware of all the elaborate preparations that often go into a church wedding: getting the best man, bride's maid, ring bearer and flower girls, preparing the guest list, printing the invitation cards and programmes, the bridal gown, the wedding car, floral decorations, photography and the wedding dinner.

For Christian couples getting married, the more important preparations are the spiritual preparations, to have a happy and God-centered marriage.

And they need to spend time in prayer before they actually commit themselves to keep the marriage vows they will make to each other before the Lord. Those who do not prepare themselves adequately for marriage may find themselves running into problems soon.

Now, the imminent return of our Lord Jesus Christ is just like marriage in this particular aspect - we must make good preparations for it. And this is the first and main lesson of the Parable of the Ten Virgins. It was told by Jesus in order to emphasise to his disciples how important it is to be prepared for his second coming.

In this parable, Jesus is represented by the bridegroom. Christians are represented by the ten virgins who waited for him to arrive. Our preparations are represented by the lamps and the oil that the virgins took with them. Now these ten virgins were not the ones getting married. They were only bridesmaids or participants in the wedding.

In ancient Jewish weddings, the wedding celebrations took place in the house of the bridegroom. And it was customary for the bridegroom to go out and fetch his bride from her father's house, and bring her back to his home in a grand wedding procession.

This procedure could be quite long. The climax of the whole wedding was the time when the bridegroom finally arrived with the bride at his home and had the big marriage feast there. There would be wedding participants waiting there for their arrival, and they would have the privilege of joining the couple in their joyful marriage feast. It was at such a feast that Christ performed his first miracle, of turning water into wine.

The ten virgins in the parable formed the welcoming party for the groom and his bride. Their duty was to watch out for the groom's approach. And they eagerly watched for his arrival by a certain time, but there was no sign of the procession. His procession was evidently delayed.

In those days they had no way to tell why there was a delay, or when they could expect the procession to arrive. All they could do was wait. They waited longer and longer but the groom had still not come! Their alertness seem to wane as night time came, but the ten virgins still waited there for him to arrive.

When they became tired with all that waiting, they fell asleep. Then suddenly at midnight, they were awakened by the cry 'behold the bridegroom comes; go out to meet him!'

Now this was the moment they had all been anxiously waiting for. This was now the time they were supposed to perform the duty they had been assigned to perform as the welcoming party.

Five of them were adequately prepared and were able to do it well. They welcomed the bridegroom and entered his house with him and his bride for the feast that climaxed the wedding. Let us pause for a while to see how this relates to us.

The long wait in this parable clearly depicts the long time that the church has waited for our Lord to come. Almost two thousand years have already passed since Christ ascended up to heaven! Generation after generation of Christians have all been looking for Christ to appear in the skies, but still he has not come. Many have even given up waiting and think either that Christ is not going to return at all, or that he has already returned, but only in an unseen, spiritual manner.

These negative responses to the long delay in Christ's coming today is exactly what the Bible predicts will happen. We hear in 2 Peter 3:3,4 "Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."

But why is it taking such a long time for the Lord to return? Let us learn that there is a

good reason for it. The main point here is that the Lord knows what he is doing and all things are under his full control.

Two thousand years may seem like an immensely long time to us, but this is only because we are finite creatures. With God there are no delays at all. Everything is proceeding right on schedule!

As Moses testified, a thousand years in the sight of God are but as yesterday when it is past. And the only reason why Christ has not come sooner is that he is very patient with mankind. The fulness of the Gentiles who are to be saved through the Gospel of Christ has not been reached yet.

But the day will come, and it may be very soon, that this number will be fulfilled, and then the Lord Jesus Christ will return to earth exactly as he has promised!

This may take place at the least expected time. The world will not be prepared for this event, since Jesus himself said that it will be like the days of Noah - the world at large will all be busy eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, fighting and doing business right up till the very moment of the second coming.

But we who love the Lord Jesus Christ must be prepared for him to come at any time. This is absolutely required of us and commanded of us. It is actually part of our Christian living.

Turning to Christ for salvation means, among other things, being committed to wait for His return.

Are you committed to wait patiently for Christ to return? Are you like the five wise virgins in the parable, who made absolutely sure that they would be ready to go forth and meet the bridegroom when he comes? Perhaps you would like to ask then: How can we be prepared to meet Christ when he comes? I would like to suggest four steps you might take.

First of all, we should lay aside all hindrances in our lives. God's Word tells us that we must 'lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,'

This means that we should search our lives - and ask if we are living in sin, or doing any thing that is outside the will of God. Perhaps it is time now for us to take stock of our lives and see if we need to remove any deadweight that is attached to us and hindering

us in our pursuit of Christ.

The second step is to rekindle the flames of our first love for the Lord and be enthusiastic in service for the Lord. We should be occupied with serving God until Jesus comes.

The third step is to exercise good stewardship of our time and talents. We should make the best efficient use of whatever resources we have left for the Lord. There are many things you can do for the Lord, to glorify Him. You can study His Word and apply it, pray for the Lord's work, encourage fellow Christians, and share the gospel with your friends and loved ones.

The fourth step is to maintain these things well. Many are good at starting on a course of action, but not many are able to keep themselves focused on it. You need to keep up a steady pace until you reach the end. This can be done only in the power that God gives to you for Christian living: the power of the Holy Spirit that you need to depend on every day.

These four steps are essential for living in the light of Christ's return. Take these steps and you will be like the five wise virgins who took more than enough oil with them to last until the bridegroom arrived. The first and most important lesson we have learned from this parable is the need to be prepared for Christ's return.

Let us go on now to consider the second lesson.

Do not wait until it is too late to prepare for Christ's coming.

This is the lesson that we learn from the five foolish virgins. When the bridegroom arrived, they were utterly unprepared to meet him. They were awakened by the sounds at midnight only to find that their lamps had all gone out and all the oil in their lamps was gone. In their state of panic they begged the wise virgins for oil. But the wise virgins wisely refused to give them any. Now, this does not mean that the wise virgins were being mean, selfish and unfriendly toward the foolish virgins.

It just shows that preparedness cannot be transferred from one person to another. Every person has to make his or her own preparations for Christ's coming. So the five foolish virgins rushed to make their last minute preparations. And they managed to buy their oil, but by the time they returned, it was just too late. The door of bridegroom's house was shut tight and they were not allowed to join the marriage feast.

All their calls and pleas to him availed nothing, as he said, 'I do not know you.' In the same way, there are many who profess the name of Christ who will hear the same words from the mouth of Christ one day. They think they are saved but are mistaken. They will be utterly unprepared and undone at his return and not allowed to have a part in His kingdom.

There are many who profess to be Christians today but are not prepared at all for Christ's coming. They continue to live in their old sins and see no need to serve Christ in any way. And they hold on to a false sense of security, thinking that all will be well with them. But when the Lord descends the clouds, they will be really surprised to realise that they were never saved, to begin with.

If you are caught unprepared when Christ returns, you will have no one but yourself to blame, because God's Word has already given you such ample warning that you have really no excuse! Jesus has already informed us that his coming will take place unexpectedly, like a thief in the night.

Remember that Jesus Christ may come at any time soon.

The Bible says that no one knows the hour or day of our Lord's return. 'Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.' Amen