

Good morning, good to see you.

We're continuing our series in Matthew and today we come to Chapter 25.

Last week Jeremy talked about the Coming of the Kingdom of God:

the Dawn of Heaven;

where this world, with all its injustice and pain and inequality is wrapped up (its over – enough is enough) and heaven begins.

And I guess if we asked *anyone* in Lewes

“**assuming heaven is real** - would you want to go there?

“do you want to go heaven”?

most (if not all) would say “yes”.

Surely most people (if not all) would say “Yes”.

It would be interesting to ask “why”,

but their eagerness for heaven will depend on three things:

how much they believe it exists;

how tough life is for them at the moment; and

how good (how brilliant) they imagine heaven to be!

Jesus paints the Dawn of Heaven as being like a Wedding.

It is the climax of a Romance;

It is the consummation of hope (everything that we have been looking forward to)

It is a celebration of love to be shared with friends and all creation! –

a party to end all parties!

Jesus says “the Coming of the Kingdom of Heaven is like a Wedding”

And then he tells a Parable about it.

He talks about

Our Common Invitation;

Our different Responses; and

Our separate Destinies

And I am just going to walk through it this morning,

Three ideas:

Our Common Invitation

Our different Responses; and

Our separate Destinies

So if you'd turn with me to p994, lets see what God is saying to us about entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

1. He firstly, says there is a Common Invitation.

v1 Jesus says “at that time the Kingdom of Heaven will be like 10 virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom”.

I guess its no surprise to say that ancient Middle Eastern wedding celebrations, are different to the ones we hold in Lewes.

In our culture, the wedding is mostly focussed upon the Bride.

We wait for the Bride.
It's the bride who is the centre of attention.
Everyone stands up when the Bride enters the Church.
Everyone turns to look at her when she comes down the aisle.
In our culture we wait for the Bride.

In African culture it seems we wait for the congregation.

*I've told you this story before
But about 10 years ago a Nigerian friend of mine called Michelle got married.
Come with me in your imagination,
I am in my study putting some finishing touches to the service
when I glance out of the Window.*

*And there in my back garden are a whole load of BIG African Ladies,
wearing bright yellow and green dresses
with those tall hats covered in fruit coming through the back gate.*

*I'm a little perturbed
(this is not usually what I see looking out of my study window).
They knock on my back door and ask me: "Why is the church not open?"*

*I explain (as they wander in and make themselves at home)
"well the wedding doesn't begin until 2:00, so perhaps you might like to come back in an hour".
"But NO they say, its starts at 1:00!"*

*And they show me their invitations.
I look, I read, and the blood drains from my face.
Because they are right.*

Their invitation says its starts at 1:00, and it is now 5 past one and I'm late !!

*So I check all my paper-work...
and everything I have says it starts at 2:00pm.*

*So now I'm **really** confused,
I call Michelle at home, and I explain what's going on
and she laughs and says
"yeah we sent all our African guests invitations saying it would start at 1:00pm knowing they would
be late!!"*

*I say to her "that's crazy"
and she says "well how many have arrived?"
I say they're all over the place there's at least 20 of them sitting in my study!*

*She laughs again and says well if they'd ALL arrived on time there should be 100's of them!!
In Africa it seems we wait for the congregation.*

But in Jesus' culture, you waited for the groom.

This is how it went...
On the morning of the wedding,
the groom would go to the Bride's house and
there he would enter into protracted negotiations about the exact "bride price" he had to pay.

A sign of the family's love for their daughter,
would be how hard they made it on him to secure her hand.
The harder it was, the more drawn out the negotiations,
the more they valued their girl! They weren't just giving her away!
(I am sure my family have been born in the wrong culture!).

So they haggled & bargained and eventually – **and I mean eventually** (and never before sunset!)
they would strike a deal.

So now its, at least, evening ,
and the groom with HIS entourage would then make their way to the wedding feast in carnival
fashion.

All the girls of the village would be allowed to join the procession but only IF they light the way
with their lamps.

They can join the wedding celebrations, but only if they joined the procession and light the way -
not by right, but as a favour.
Do you see?

Now these girls in Matthew 25 therefore have “no right” to join the celebrations it would only be by
favour,

So what do we know:

Firstly, Jesus is speaking into a rural, village context.

They don't have multiplex cinemas,

They don't have bowling alleys or night clubs

Weddings are the best celebrations they're going to see all year.

This wedding is the talk of the town, the place to be!

Secondly, these girls are not bridesmaids. They are just regular village girls.

They have no right to be at the party:

they are not part of the family,

they are not known to the groom,

they can come but only if they join the procession of lighting the way

This parable is about the dawn of the Kingdom of Heaven.

And the invitation is anyone and everyone

in this world, in Lewes, in our church.

Anyone and everyone, who wants to be at the

- the climax of creation
- who wants to experience the consummation of all our hopes
- who wants to know the love of God first-hand.

His invitation is for all.

This is the party of the Universe and who in their right mind would want to miss it?

So the first verse draws us in and puts us on the edge of our seats.

Jesus says

Do you want to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?

Do you want to know the boundless, limitless, staggering love of God?,

Do you want to discover **the glory** of why God made you!!

Well the invitation is here.

How will you respond?

Because

2. Secondly, there are different Responses.

These 10 girls knew what they wanted.

And in the words of someone famous “they had a cunning plan” on how to get it.

But the problem was that

v2 Five of them were foolish and 5 were wise.

In the words of BBC1: 5 were BlackAdders and 5 were Baldrics,

But the surprising thing is you can't tell who is who just by looking at them.

From the outside:

All 10 girls **hoped** for the same thing: they all wanted to meet the groom and join the procession and go to the party;

All 10 **looked the same**: they were all maidens, they were all spruced up, they were all ready to go; and

All 10 **did the same things**: they all carried lamps, they all went out, they all waited, they all slept, they all heard the shout.

Looking at them, you simply cannot tell the difference between them.

There is nothing in their **hopes**, in their **appearance**, in their **behaviour** that would distinguish them from each other.

Now if this parable has piqued our interest, if Jesus' words have drawn us in, if we are wanting to be sure that we will enter heaven, then this is deeply disturbing!

For IF, what they hope for, look like and do, does not distinguish **them** (and yet we know that some make it in and some are left outside)

Then how can WE tell whether we will make it or not?

Do you see?

If what we hope for (to meet with God, to find our reason for being, to enter heaven),

If what we look like (*I don't know*, the scripture verses on our fridges and the Soul Survivor stickers on our cars),

If what we do (sing of hymns, say prayer, be kind),

If those things doesn't distinguish the Black-Adders from the Baldrick, the wise from the foolish, the ones who will enter heaven and the ones who won't

Then what does?

What is the vital thing that is different between them?

v3 says The foolish ones took their lamps but they did not take any oil with them, the wise, however took oil.

Here is the difference!

The foolish ones had no oil. The wise ones did.

Having formulated their plan and met up

they would have gone off into the village full of excitement.

If they set off at dusk they would have gone with torches to light their way, with their special lamps held in their hands but not lit.

When the Bridegroom comes

5 of them will use their oil to keep their lamps burning,

5 of them will light the wick only to discover that the flame dies immediately because they have no oil.

.... that half of them didn't stop to check their oil seems incredible to me
.... that half of them didn't plan ahead, didn't check out what was needed,
but thoughtlessly careered off into the night
(like party animals, set on having a good time)
without having checked that they had what was needed seems incredible.
But it happens.

I meet people all the time who have never considered whether God has a claim on their life,
They are very happy to acknowledge that the existence of God is the most important question in the world
But they career off into their life – not giving it much of a second thought.

The Office for National Statistics said last that 71% of our country say "they are Christians", but only 54% believe in God.

71% say they are Christians - 54% say they believe in God.

So half of them haven't a clue what they are saying when they claim to be Christians.

*71% say they are Christians but only 9% go to church.
which indicates how casually the vast majority of people take their faith!*

Adults, many with over $\frac{3}{4}$ of their life gone,
who **if you asked them**
"would you want to go to heaven" would say absolutely "yes"
but who have no clue of what it takes to get there.

5 maidens go off to wait for the bridegroom without thinking that "a lamp needs Oil";
Huge numbers of people in our country go through this life without thinking that "they need God".

It is a crazy/foolish/reckless to wander out into the world,
knowing that we will die,
knowing that God will come again,
knowing that one day HE will hold up our number saying "come in number 57" and
we will meet God and not knowing what it takes to get to heaven.

There are some things we should not put off,
There are some things that you cannot leave to the last minute.
studying for your French "O" level is one of them.
And finding God before you die is another.

The wise ones had oil

They saw their need, they planned ahead, they secured what it takes - oil.

Oil in the Bible is a picture of the Spirit of God.

It is used in the Bible for making kings, for anointing Priests, for Commissioning Prophets

It is used to symbolise healing and blessing and the work of the Holy Spirit in someone's life.
The wise ones had it, the foolish ones didn't.

For you and me the Holy Spirit:
makes us children of God by giving life to our spirit;
The Holy Spirit heals our hurts by giving us strength to receive God's forgiveness and strength to offer it to others too;
The Holy Spirit guarantees our inheritance by being God's presence in our lives never to leave or forsake us.
God says "we need it", he says "we must have it", and
I think we must "**know** we have it".

Hoping / Guessing / not THINKING that we NEED God's Spirit in us
is utter foolishness.

*We need God's Spirit in our lives
every bit as much as a lamp needs oil in its.*

So here is the key, and here is the way...
What we need to do, if we have never done it before
is to kneel before God in repentance,
to ask for his forgiveness,
to make him Lord and centre of our life.

If you have never done it before
then use this communion rail, use the pew you are sitting on
to kneel in repentance,
to ask for forgiveness,
to declare him Lord, Centre, God of your life.

Then, says God (in Ephesians 1:13)
"Having believed, you are marked in him with a seal, the Holy Spirit, a deposit guaranteeing your inheritance".
This is on p1173 and its worth turning up if you have your Bibles open...
God says "Having believed" – once you have done those things..

You WILL BE / not "you may be", not "you could be", not you "you assume you will be" - **BUT you will be** – it is a promise,

You will be MARKED IN HIM with a Seal (*not something that David Attenborough photographs in the arctic*, but a Seal as a proof of ownership, the thumb print of God "MINE")

You will be marked in him with a Seal
the Holy Spirit a DEPOSIT GUARANTEEING your inheritance.
a deposit is something that makes something else yours,
a deposit is a guarantee saying "I will come back a second time to claim this for my own"
a deposit is a "taste of things to come".

This is what God says happens to us "when we believe":
when we kneel in repentance,
ask for his forgiveness,
declare him Lord.

We are given God's Spirit guaranteeing the kingdom of heaven.

We are all invited.

How will you respond?

Because we need to know there are

3. Separate Destinies.

And so v5 The bridegroom is a long time in coming

What this tells us is that the Bride Price was very high – it took a long time to do the negotiations!

What this tells us is that the cost to secure the bride's hand was very steep indeed and therefore

What this tells us is that the Bride must be **highly valued** by the groom.

The bridegroom is a long time coming.

So long that

v5 The maidens fall asleep (all 10 of them, there is no distinction).

We will all fall asleep

Death will close each of our eyes,

we will all die

And then the next thing we will know, will be

v6 At midnight, the cry ringing out – The cry of God's arrival, the dawn of heaven will ring out, so loud that everyone hears, those awake (obviously) but also those who have fallen asleep, every one hears the cry "*Here comes the Bridegroom, come out to meet him*"

and suddenly everyone gets up and there is a mad scramble

v7 to light their lamps and be ready.

One day, There will be a shout of joy so loud it will wake the dead

and there will be a gathering of everyone.

And it becomes a moment of truth...

This is a good news parable.

Because what is not obvious here – is, who is the bride?

Jesus has not mentioned the bride once!

Who is the bride...?

Well, we don't read it here, but elsewhere we read that "the bride" is the people of God.

You and me!

So these 5 ordinary village girl turn up to the wedding of this prince, this most distinguished groom, and

as they enter the gates the chief usher throws a white robe around them; and

as they turn the corner the music starts to play,

as they walk down the aisle, all assembled stand on top toes to see them and applaud and

the whole of creation welcomes home the people of God!

This is a good news parable!

it reassures us of our destiny,

it gives us courage to face an uncertain future

it says, *do you know why Jesus is late coming??* It is because the bride is valuable and he longs for all men to be saved!

This is a good news parable

it invites us to a celebration that will last forever
it paints for us the fulfilment of our heart's deepest desire.
it says no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him!

But it is also a bad news parable.

For there is this, heart stopping moment,
when the foolish maidens discover that they have no oil –
and they **need** oil.

So in v8 in their desperation they say
“give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out”.

But in Jesus' parable **this is not possible**.
It is not possible
because it is not possible to transfer faith from one person to another.

The acceptance of God's forgiveness
The declaration that God is our God
is an individual, personal transaction between each of us and God.

It cannot be transferred from one person to another,
It cannot be handed down from one generation to another.
It cannot be given to us because of our parents, grandparents or brothers faith.

*Ted Barker died this week.
Edna told me was a strong man, a man's man.
He was an elite PT instructor in the army
He was a seasoned Prison Officer.
Yet one day his daughter found him crying, sobbing like a baby.
She said “I have never seen my dad cry”.*

*He had just woken from a dream
He had a dream that he had died and he knew he wasn't a Christian
He said in his dream
“I am not going without my daughter Lesley coming with me”.
So he presented himself to God holding Lesley's hand*

*But God said to him –
Lesley has to go back
And you cannot enter heaven through her faith...
It shook him to the core...*

Our relationship with God has to be personal.
It has to be individual.
It has to be ours.

Jesus ends the parable on a note of great pathos.
The 5 foolish maidens are locked out.
*v11 “Sir!, Sir! Open the door for us!
v12 But he replied “I tell you the truth I do not know you”*

I tell you the truth, (this is not a lie, this is not just a story, this is not some unfair, arbitrary decision, it's the truth)

I never knew you, **because you choose never to get to know me.**

So “look out” v13 says Jesus. “Look out”.

Look Out because one day your life will be over.

Look Out because you may fall asleep at any time,

Look Out because you need to be prepared

Look Out because the choices we make here on earth
are honoured by God in Heaven.

Look Out because you need the Spirit of God in you
every bit as much as lamp needs oil.

Do you have it?

Let us pray...