

The Readings for the Gathering

Epistle

Ephesians 5:15

¹⁵ Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise,

Gospel

The Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids

Matthew 25:1-13

²⁵ “At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³ The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴ The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵ The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. ⁶ “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ ⁷ “Then all the bridesmaids woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’ ⁹ “No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’ ¹⁰ “But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The bridesmaids who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. ¹¹ “Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’ ¹² “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’ ¹³ “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

Contemporary reading

'Jesus' simple parable on raising awareness'

by Joshua Tilghman, February 9 2013

<http://www.spiritofthescripture.com/id1211-jesus-simple-parable-on-raising-awareness.html>

I don't think there's anyone who has put the meaning of this parable any better than Eckert Tolle in his book, *The Power of Now*. I quote: "...Jesus speaks of five careless (unconscious) women who do not have enough oil (consciousness) to keep their lamps burning (stay present) and so miss the bridegroom (the Now) and don't get to the wedding feast (enlightenment). These five stand in contrast to the five wise women who have enough oil (stay conscious)...[These parables] point to the transcendence of the egoic mind and the possibility of living in an entirely new state of consciousness." Tolle nailed it. This parable has everything to do with something that we all have the power to implement every day: raising our awareness.

The Reflection

“Esoterically’ understanding....” Now there’s a word! I had to look it up myself. Esoteric. Though it’s one of those words I read in context and my ad hoc understanding seems to work – explaining it to others needs more precision. One dictionary describes esoteric knowledge as “intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with a specialized knowledge or interest.” That probably describes us in this day and age – we are a small group of people with a specialised knowledge or interest. However, this esoteric explanation of the Gospel reading may elude some of you also in the end – don’t let that worry you. For those who get it, enjoy!

We read everything from a certain frame of reference. We might read a novel about a certain setting actually more interested in the author’s research about the setting than about her characters. We read a travel book for its descriptions of a different place, we read non-fiction for facts and details. I watch some reality shows in TV as character studies. We might watch the news for the weather, for the political news only or the good sort stories at the end. For everything we take in, we tend to wear a certain pair of spectacles or apply particular sets of filters.

A common filter applied to this parable in the Gospel is an apocalyptic or eschatological one – the parable is usually taken as a description of the end of the world. We are all the wise and foolish bridal attendants waiting, interminably it seems, for the Son of God to return at the Final Judgment. If we are prepared, that is, are the wise ones, we get to join the wedding feast. If we are not wise, but foolish, we are left out in the cold – (or maybe in the warm, as in this world view the wedding feast is often been taken as heaven, so being shut out is hell.) Sound familiar? I don’t know about you but in this version, I was always left puzzled that the wise attendants would not be kind to their companions and lend them some oil. How mean is that! When they had the ability to get all ten of them in, why didn’t they do it? Typical! Smug, self-satisfied Christians, keeping others out of their equally smug, self-satisfied heaven. Who cares if the parable says it is too late! There is always an alternative!

A less well-known reading, hence an *esoteric* reading, looks at this parable from a different standpoint. Seeing the eschatological reading has had a fair hearing, let’s give the esoteric reading airplay. This view of the parable sees it as a commentary on how much preparation or work we individually put in to increasing our self-awareness; growing our consciousness over our lives. It looks at whether we are preparing ourselves so

we will be ready when the moment for that inner, deeply sacred marriage to happen in our psyche – the moment Eckhart Tolle calls ‘The Now’; that moment when everything comes together and we ‘get it’.

Joshua Tilghman whose quote from Tolle we heard read, surrounds that quote in his blog with more explanation which is succinct and to the point:¹ Tilghman writes that the five foolish bridesmaids represent our five senses which are directed to and interact with the outside world. The five wise bridesmaids represent our conscious awareness which is focused inwards. Tilghman argues that the Jesus or bridegroom figure here is not the historical Jesus but “A state of being within us” and adds “This state of being is developed through conscious attention which causes an expansion in consciousness.” So, this transforms the long wait or the bridegroom from a trick being played on us by God, keeping out of sight still it is too late. The waiting period for the bridegroom simply is our lives going by, year after year, decade after decade. Many miss this passing of time because of those five senses focused on the outer world – food, shelter, clothing, work, family – all important but not everything we need for conscious living. Suddenly you wake up at your 60th birthday and wonder where the last 30 years have gone.

We know that if we do not exercise certain muscles and then suddenly go tramping, skiing or running, we feel the pain of unused muscles creakily responding to unaccustomed use. It is not unlike that with spiritual muscle. If we turn off simplistic explanations we have been given in church or perhaps reject apocalyptic readings of the Scripture and turn away, not bothering with all that ‘childish stuff’, we stop exercising that spiritual muscle. It reacts to not being used and atrophies, weakens. It cannot support a vital spiritual life anymore. That’s why I often meet people with what I call a ‘Sunday School faith’ at funerals or weddings. They’ve fallen asleep on the job and allowed the outer life to become all encompassing. I can understand why – the outside world can be demanding and fascinating and stimulating. Because this kind of understanding is esoteric, only a few understand its importance. But the end result is that they miss out on a lot they could have had and miss out on a lot of joy and true happiness.

Tilghman then turns to the meaning of the marriage in the parable. He writes:

The marriage represents the union of your higher nature and lower nature. This process takes place from engaging in constant present awareness, a profound type of meditation. Just like as in the case of the foolish virgins, the door is always shut to this union for those who constantly keep their attention focused on the outside world instead of going within themselves to realize the present moment.

He continues:

So what’s so special about this present moment? Being aware of the present moment allows you to bath[e] in the joy creation! Learn to bask in its beauty, even in the most unlikely of activities and places, and I promise your consciousness will expand.

When the foolish virgins come back to the bridegroom after purchasing their oil, Jesus responded that the bridegroom did not know them. You are not going to realize this state of being with *purchased* oil. It is not oil that the world can give you. This oil can only come from within you.

That’s why the bridegroom didn’t **know** the foolish virgins.

This is why the wise bridesmaids could not give oil to the foolish bridesmaids. We cannot give another person the consciousness which has been growing in us, it must be a work which we do within ourselves, for ourselves. It is not transferable to others. Tilghman asks his readers

How well do you know yourself? To truly know one’s own self, you have to be familiar with conscious awareness. You have to really experience it, and be aware that you are experiencing it. When you come to the point where you realize that you are this conscious awareness, then you can say you are known by the bridegroom.

From applying this esoteric lens to interpreting this parable, and many of Jesus’ other sayings, we get also a different perspective on traditional Christianity. In many ways the traditional orthodox Christian approach which emphasises a God out there whom we have to placate and please, encourages the *foolish* bridesmaid approach. It leads us to rely on our outward-facing antenna to make sense of the world and of God. Instead, we need to pursue spiritual practices which will develop that inner sense of being, that develop the ability to hear that still small voice within which we already know speaks wisdom. We need spiritual practices like Centering Prayer 12.30pm every Tuesday in the Centre; spiritual practices which acquaint us with the sacred within. Then our light will never go out, but instead will illumine the world around us. You used to sing about it as a child: “Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning....” Will you be wise? Or will you be foolish? Don’t leave it too long to find out.

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¹ <http://www.spiritofthescriture.com/id1211-jesus-simple-parable-on-raising-awareness.html>. The internet address in the order of service is incorrect – same website, different blog! Apologies.