

Romsey Baptist church 8th October 2006 am Matthew 25: 1-13

I want to start my talk this morning with a bit of magic – and I need your help.

Want you to think of a number between 1 & 10.

Multiply that number by 9.

Add the digits of this number together.

Subtract 5.

Now, find the letter that corresponds to that number, where 1 = a 2 = b and so on.

Think of a country that starts with that letter.

Think of an animal that starts with the second letter of that country.

All got a picture of that animal

I want you to put up your hands if that animal is grey in colour.

How did I know –?

Sum of the digits of any number between 1 and 10 multiplied by 9 is 9. Subtract 5 is 4. 4 = D – most people think of Denmark. And most people pick elephant for E.

What's that all about – well it is an illustration of the kind of lengths that some people go to to try and work out when Jesus will return. Over the years there have been countless attempts to predict the date – applying various codes to the scriptures, trying to match events to the scriptures - and every single attempt to discover the date has failed – which is not really surprising when Jesus states clearly that no one knows the day or hour of his return. And I would suggest that it has not only failed, it has often been spiritually and psychologically destructive.

But while we cannot know the timing of Jesus return, we do know that Jesus will return.

On holiday last week, the guy who ran the place was a bit of a joker and it wasn't always easy to know when he was telling the truth. On our rides we saw quite a few houses for sale and we saw one sign attached to a tree in an orchard. We assumed that it was the whole orchard up for sale. But Giles told us that it wasn't it was just that one tree. We of course didn't believe him.

Then on another ride his wife told us that there is a market for selling old trees. Apparently with all the new building work being done, there is a demand for old trees to disguise the newness of the property, so people are selling their old trees for quite a lot of money.

So when we went past that tree for sale we told Giles that we hadn't believed him when he told us it was just the tree, we thought he was joking – but Miranda had put us straight and told us about the selling tree thing – and Giles laughed and said that while Miranda was telling the truth in this case – it was the orchard that was for sale, not just the tree.

But like the little boy who cried Wolf once too often, it was difficult to know whether Giles was joking or telling the truth –

But the same is not true of Jesus. All of the promises and predictions of Jesus have come true. Mark went to great lengths in his gospel account to show that Jesus knew that he was going to be betrayed by one of his disciples, he knew that the Jewish authorities would beat him, he knew that the Romans would crucify him – but he also promised that he would rise from the dead. All of these promises were fulfilled.

Because Jesus predictions have come true – we can be confident that his promise to return in glory will also come true. It has been close to 2000 years since Jesus return to the Father, and Christians have waited patiently ever since – while many would like his return to happen sooner rather than later – we should continue to believe that Jesus will return. We must continue to believe that he will return.

And as we wait, unsure of whether Jesus will return tonight, tomorrow, next month or year or next century, Jesus implores us to stay alert and be ready for his coming.

That is the message to his disciples that we are looking at this morning – a message that he gave through a parable about 10 virgins who were waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom, so they could escort him with lamps, and join in with the wedding banquet.

The fact that the only other reference to a bridegroom in Matthew is 9:15 where Jesus used the term to refer to himself, makes it pretty clear that in this parable, Jesus is the bridegroom, and his delayed arrival in the parable is a reference to the delay in his second coming.

In this parable, the unexpected delay in the arrival of the bridegroom resulted in the virgins falling asleep. Then at midnight a cry rang out, the bridegroom is here – come out to meet him. All the virgins woke up, they sorted their lamps out, but, five of the virgins were foolish, and hadn't brought any oil with them, and so they found that their lamps were beginning to go out. Major crisis.

They asked the other 5 virgins who were wise and had brought some spare oil with them in case of unexpected delays, if they could borrow some of theirs – but that wasn't possible – if they shared out the spare oil then there wouldn't be enough and all the lamps would go out – Instead they were told to go and buy some more oil – it seems that although it was midnight, because of the festivities this would be possible.

But while they were gone – the bridegroom arrived – and the 5 virgins who were ready, prepared, went into the festivities with the bridegroom.

After the 5 unwise, unprepared virgins had found a source for some oil, they returned to the scene of the festivities, but found that the door was shut – and despite their appeals, it remained shut – with them on the outside.

The message of the parable is clear and unmistakable – only those who are alert, and ready for the arrival of the Bridegroom, Christ, will enter the festivities on the day of his return, the day of judgement. Those who are unprepared, will not join him at the feast, they will find themselves outside, with the door shut, symbolising that there will be a time when it will be too late to alter the division between those at the banquet and those outside.

Then in verse 13 Jesus reinforces the main point to be taken from the parable, if the listeners had not already discerned it – therefore, in light of what happened to the 5 foolish virgins, who were locked outside of the banquet because they were not prepared for the arrival of the Bridegroom, keep watch. Be spiritually alert, prepared, be in a constant state of vigilance for the coming of the son of man, because you do not know the day or the hour.

However, in this parable Jesus gives no indication of what it means to keep watch, to be prepared, ready. Over the next couple of weeks we will unpack this some more as we look at the next two parables in chapter 25, but this morning we are going to look back to the previous chapter for some insight.

Before that though I would like to make it clear that the absolute bottom line in being prepared for Jesus return is to be in a relationship with him, to have accepted that he is the Son of God, that he died on the cross to forgive our sins, that he rose again defeating the power of death, and through our faith in him we can be transformed by the Spirit of God at work in our life.

And that is a choice, a decision that each one of us must make. God will hold us personally accountable for our own spiritual condition, we will not be able to borrow or buy this from someone else at the last minute. We will not be spiritually prepared because of the faith of our parents or our partners – we are responsible for our own spiritual condition before God.

Having made that commitment to God, Jesus says that while we wait for his return, we must live in a way that is consistent with our claims to be a disciple.

Chapter 24, verse 36 to 51, Jesus gave another parable about being watchful for his return.

Matt 24:44-51 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow-servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In these verses Jesus makes the point that being ready for his return means doing the will of God, fulfilling his commands in his absence, and to be found doing so when he returns. As believers it means we must not neglect or abuse our responsibilities as Christ's people on earth. Only those who remain faithful in their living and obedient to their calling as Christ's ambassadors, will be unembarrassed by his return, which may well be longer than expected, but which is absolutely certain.

Being prepared for Christ's return then is not a passive standing by the door, with your banquet gown on, ready to leave, being prepared for his return is active, and as we shall see in the next couple of weeks it includes service and sacrifice in order to demonstrate the love of God to a fallen world.

This morning we should ask ourselves the question – are we ready for Christ's return? If he were to return tonight would we be ready? Fundamentally are we in that relationship with him – have we put our faith and hope in him or are we still turning away from him and his offer of forgiveness?

If we have turned to him, are we continuing to walk the walk. Is there consistency between what we claim to believe and the way we live our life? Are we like the faithful servant, who will be found doing the will of God?

Because none of us are perfect I imagine that there are areas in all of our lives that we would not be totally pleased about, where we recognise that we are not following God's will. For some of us these might be pretty small, but for some of us they might be more fundamental – some of us may well be closer to the unfaithful servant, and are abusing the trust that's God has placed in us. Either way, we shouldn't pretend that it is ok – we should do something about it, seeking the help of others where necessary.

We don't know when Jesus will return, but we do know that he will return, and when he does, he doesn't want us to be out shopping for oil, he wants us to be doing his will, serving him and bringing him glory.

Amen.