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YOU CAN ARRIVE EARLY AND STILL BE LATE!

Today's Text: Matt. 25: 1-13

Extracts:

[Jesus said], “Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to *ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ... And at midnight, a cry was heard, ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’ Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps; and the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But the wise answered, saying, ‘No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding, and the door was shut” [Matt. 25: 1, 6-10]*

On 21 May 2009, Natasha Cumberbatch sued the Prime Minister of Trinidad & Tobago (West Indies), Hon. Patrick Manning, claiming that he had used “annoying language with intent to provoke her to breach the peace.”¹ On 14 October 2009, Natasha came very early to the Port of Spain Second Magistrate Court where the case was scheduled to be heard. She waited and waited but her case was not called. Later, a clerk announced that the case had been transferred to the Eighth Court. She rushed there only to be told that her case had been called at 9.20 a.m. and dismissed because of the “non-appearance” of the complainant.

Natasha came early to court and yet was late for her case. How could that have happened? As it turned out, she had not read the rescheduling notice sent to both parties to the dispute. The defendant did and went straight to the other court. Natasha ignored the notice and went to the wrong court even though she got there early. So, punctuality is more than time-keeping. You must meet all the requirements for you to be admitted. We may easily find ourselves in similar situations. For example, you could arrive at the international check-in counter at the airport quite early only to discover that you have forgotten your passport at home! Do you know how many opportunities you have missed just because you have not paid sufficient attention to what it takes to get them? What is the essence of your long years in the church or ministry or profession if you continue to ignore or undermine what it takes to soar? What if that is also your attitude to the kingdom of heaven? This week's study is certainly for you!

¹ Based on Jensen LaVende, “Case against PM in wrong courtroom,” *Trinidad Express*. Thurs., 15 October 2009; http://www.trinidadexpress.com/index.pl/article_news?id=161544500

1. Background: Ten virgins arrived together but only five were admitted!

Ten virgins were invited to “meet the bridegroom” [Matt. 25: 1]. These young and innocent ladies were being offered the privilege of a life time for the parable is illustrative of the kingdom of heaven. The groom represents the Lamb of God, Jesus the Christ, and “blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb” [Rev. 19: 7-9]. Let us examine what the virgins did with their unique chance:

a) *There were admission requirements*

Since the exact time of the bridegroom’s arrival was not known, the ten virgins were required to come with their lamps. We are told that five of the virgins were wise and five were foolish. The wise ones took extra oil along with their filled lamps while the foolish ones did not take extra oil [Matt. 25: 2-4]. The groom delayed his arrival, suggesting that the virgins were depleting the amount of oil in their vessels while they were waiting for his arrival. In due course, they put out their lamps and fell asleep [v. 5].

Everything that you are waiting for in life has its requirements. For example, you cannot be praying and fasting for a job when you have not applied for one for which you believe you qualify. You cannot be praying for the fruit of the womb when you are not married. You cannot be ambitious to become an accountant when you are running away from any subjects with numbers! Therefore, the beginning of any ambition you nourish is a good understanding of what it takes to make it. Otherwise, you are engaged in wishful thinking!

The virgins might not have anticipated the delay of the bridegroom but the wise ones prepared for it by bringing extra oil for their lamps. Many of us are very short-sighted and/or impatient. We want to have it our own way as if we are in a hamburger restaurant! *McDonald’s* may be customer-oriented but immigration authorities (processing residence applications of aliens) are not. Even with banks that are holding your money in trust, you have to meet their requirements, such as PIN number or valid signature on your cheques (checks) before they can release cash to you. Therefore, you must prepare for the long haul. It will come but not according to your lust or impatience.

b) *When the time came only half of them were ready!*

At midnight, a cry went out, “Behold the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!” The ten virgins awoke and trimmed their lamps. The five foolish ones turned to their five wise colleagues and said, “Give us some of your oil, *for our lamps are going out.*” The wise ones replied, “No, lest

there should not be enough for us and you; but go to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.” As they went out to buy, “the bridegroom came; *and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding, and the door was shut*” [vv. 6-10]. Even though all the ten virgins arrived at the same time, only five were admitted because only those were ready to meet the groom.

This is a classical illustration of vigilance. Examine your situation right now. For example, it does not matter how hard you have studied for an exam. If you are not there when it is being administered, you cannot pass. How many times have you taken your eyes off the ball at the crucial moment when you are about to score the deciding goal? For instance, who bewitched you to give up your struggling fiancé about to graduate from law school to marry a rich business man who soon after was jailed for fraud? Who pushed you to give up your job in a stable but low-paying company to pick a high-salaried job in a high-profile firm that became bankrupt soon after? Short-sightedness and impatience can *never* make you ready when your *moment* arrives. It is immaterial for how long you have known Christ. If you have unconfessed sins at the time of His return, you are not ready for the groom

c) *The foolish virgins missed their moment even when they arrived early!*

After the door had been shut, the five foolish virgins that went out to buy oil came back and said, “Lord, Lord, open to us!” From inside, the groom replied, “Assuredly, I say to you, *I do not know you*” [vv. 11-12]. He did not say that he did not remember them but that he did not *know* them. It was total rejection. The matter was over!

God is not interested in your past achievements but in where you are with Him *this moment*. For example, God told the prophet Ezekiel, “When I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, but he trusts in his own righteousness and commits iniquity, *none of his righteous works will be remembered*, but because of the iniquity that he has committed, he shall die” [Ezek. 33: 13]. Therefore, your moment is now, not later.

From the forgoing, we learn that *punctuality* (arriving on or before time) is much more than time-keeping. It *involves being in the right place at the right time with all the necessary credentials*. If any of them is missing, you are late even when you arrive early. Let us apply that framework to examine how you are preparing for the return of Jesus or for the end of your life on earth, whichever comes first.

2. What is your readiness profile?

It is immaterial at what age you came to Christ if you are not ready to face Him in judgment this moment. Some people boast that they have been Christians or church workers from their mothers’ wombs or for donkey years. Some people

think that age or length of service will be used for ranking people in heaven. No! Jesus has said that in that Day (of judgment), many will come to Him and claim to have done exploits in His name as prophets or workers (of wonders} but He will deny them, saying, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practise lawlessness” [Matt. 7: 22-23]. If the bell of your call back home were to ring *this moment*, would you be ready to meet Christ? Let us audit your readiness profile, using the analogy of a sporting event to make it more vivid.

Imagine there were a major game in town tonight between a local team and a visiting team. You were desirous to be there at all costs. Which of the following roles would you like to play?

a) *The gate crasher*

Some people are anxious to watch the match but they do not have tickets nor do they plan to buy one. They will find ways to beat all the security traps and sneak in to watch the match free of charge. Such people are gate crashers.

Some of us want to gate crash into the kingdom of heaven. They do not accept Jesus as God or His only begotten Son, not to talk of being the only way to heaven). They think that their goodness (defined in human terms or in their religion) is enough to take them to heaven. They believe that once they can impress people around them, God will see them in the same light.

Hypocrites are a good example of gate crashers. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus spoke of hypocrites as those who draw near God with their mouths and honour Him with their lips but their hearts are far from Him. He added that such people worship God in vain, “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” [Matt. 15: 7-9].

Examine your relationship with Jesus right now. Are you simply jumping from one denomination to another more popular (but not necessarily more spiritual) one just to be seen by men as ‘born again’? Do you call on the name of Jesus only when you face danger but live in full disobedience of His words? If your answer ‘Yes’ to both questions, you are behaving like a gate crasher! You may not be able to face Christ *this moment* if He were to suddenly appear for the last judgment

b) *The spectator*

The spectator has a valid ticket and may even be the fan of one of the two teams playing that day. S(he) knows the venue and the time the match will begin. Yet, it is not every spectator that arrives before the match begins. Some spectators come before the match begins; some while the match is on. Some may stay till the end of the match or leave at any time,

depending on what they see. At any rate, they are in control of whatever they choose to do. The teams are beholden to them because they need their patronage to pay their bills. However, spectators have no personal stake in the future or sustainability of the two teams. They came for fun and that is it.

Virtually every congregation has spectators among the worshippers. They go to churches that they find more user-friendly than God-fearing. Whether or where they pay their tithes and offerings is influenced by the extent that their earthly desires are served, and those wants need not be holy! They will hardly accept any of the 5-fold ministry [apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – **Eph. 4: 11**] through which Christ’s commission to spread the Gospel to the whole world [**Matt. 28: 18-20**] can be accomplished. They cannot even pray for themselves not to talk of praying for others. Keeping the church premises clean (made dirty by their own children or wards) is beneath their dignity! They are forever complaining and never satisfied. They come to church and leave when it is most convenient for them. If that is what you do in your place of worship, you are behaving like a spectator.

That is why Paul warned the young pastor, Timothy, that in the last days, perilous times would come when worldliness would so invade the church that those who desired to be godly in Christ would suffer persecution. Nevertheless, he should continue in the things he had learned, especially from the Holy Scriptures that are able to make him “wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” [**2 Tim. 3: 1, 12-15**]. Spectators are in the church for satiation, not salvation! They are committed neither to God nor to His church.

c) *The key player*

The game cannot start without the players of both teams present. Therefore, they must be there early and be physically and emotionally fit for the match. Even among the players, there are some who carry the responsibility for victory as if it were personal to them. They are tireless from the beginning to the end; they are selfless in spraying passes to team members in the best advantage to score. Such people are the key players. .

In the parable, the five wise virgins acted as key players. They did not take their eyes off the ball. They waited patiently for the arrival of the bridegroom. They had enough oil to keep their lamps burning. So, when the groom came, they were ready. They went in and scored a resounding victory of admittance into the kingdom of heaven. .

In the words of Jesus, those who aspire to come to Him must deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow Him [Matt. 16: 24]. Whoever puts his hand on the plow and looking back is not fit for the kingdom of God [Lk 9: 62]. The whole duty of man on earth is to serve God and obey all His commandments. In deed, “God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” [Eccl. 12: 13-14]. Are you ready to deny yourself and your self-indulgence?

3. Conclusion: Watch and watch!

In concluding the parable, Jesus told His listeners, “Watch, therefore, for you know neither *the day nor the hour* in which the Son of Man is coming” [Matt. 25: 13]. Since we cannot watch what we do not know (the day or hour), what then are we supposed to watch? I believe that ***we should watch those things that are within our control***. Like the five wise virgins, we do not know the day or hour that Jesus will come back (or death will come), but we can keep perpetual vigil by making our bodies the temples of God where the Holy Spirit dwells [1 Cor. 3: 16]. After all, “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but *righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*” [Rom. 14: 17]. That should be the oil burning in the lamp of our bodies *all the time*.

God does not care for how long you have been a water-baptized Christian. He is not impressed by the rank you hold in your church. All He cares about is whether you are ready to return home to heaven at your point of death or when Christ returns, whichever comes first.

You can arrive early and still be late. Therefore, arrive ready!