

Who gets into the wedding feast?

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Pentecost + 24a Josh 24 1-3a, 14-25, Ps 78 1-7, 1 Thess 4 9-18, Matt 25 1-13

By any measure, this is a baffling parable. It talks about who gets into a wedding feast. And in parables, that means who gets to be with God. So it's a wedding feast. But in this parable, the bride doesn't even get *mentioned*, far less *appear* in the story. Ten young women go out to meet the bridegroom, but when he's late, they're kept waiting so long that they go to sleep. Where; out on the street at night?

And just as they hear the bridegroom is about to arrive, the 'wise' young women become harsh and selfish towards the 'foolish' ones and send them off to the shops. What ever happened to the golden rule? ^(Matt 7.12) And how are they meant to find an oil seller open after midnight? And what's a wedding feast doing starting after midnight anyway? And the warning about keeping awake at the end; all ten women went to sleep, but the five wise ones weren't locked out. So why even say that?

This parable baffles us because in the Gospels, the bridegroom always means Jesus. Yet he seems so unfair to these five young women, that we don't recognise the Jesus we know. And yet he says he doesn't know *them*. Do we assume that he leaves the door shut? What's going on? How can this be Gospel – Good News?

There are other lockout situations in Matthew's Gospel. Can they help us unlock the meaning of this one? There was Jesus rebuking the Pharisees for locking people out of the kingdom

of heaven. ^{23.1-13} And then there were the chief priests and Pharisees arranging for a guard to stop people opening the tomb of Jesus. ^{27.60-66} Matthew also gives us Jesus speaking three times about the 'outer darkness' where you can be 'cast out', and where there's 'weeping and gnashing of teeth'. ^(8.12, 22.13, 25.30) The first is aimed at Israel for its lack of faith, the second at the guest without a wedding garment, and the last is aimed at the slave who hid the talent entrusted to him.

So that's two where religious authorities are acting as gatekeepers, preventing people's access to the kingdom, or to Jesus. And the other three are about people not pulling their weight and keeping faith. That reminds me of Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians today to contribute practically to their community. ^{1 Thess 4.10-12}

In today's parable, I asked if we assume the bridegroom kept the door shut on the foolish young women. It doesn't say he did. Matthew just says to *keep awake*. What if the door was quietly opened after all?

That's what the last door in the Gospel makes me wonder; the stone door which sealed Jesus' tomb. *It* didn't stay shut in the night, despite the best efforts of the religious leaders and their guard of soldiers. Maybe that's where the Good News can be found; not in what the story seems to tell us, but in our wider knowledge of the story that we bring to any part of it.

I've always thought that great musicians are *great* because wherever they are in a performance, they have the whole piece in their mind. So they can interpret rather than just perform.

Is Matthew asking us to do that with this parable today? Are you and I to open this door? Amen