

Driving in the outback.

Our big fat red 4 wheel drive IZUZU parked outside has an embarrassing secret. For such a big girl she only holds 65 litres of diesel and to make matters worse she tells fibs on the fuel gauge about the real amount of fuel left.

Not such a problem in city runs on the east coast but in vast outback journeys there is a real danger of running out of fuel. So on long remote hauls we must carry the obligatory jerry cans ...two at least. There are no guarantees that anyone who stops will have spare fuel for you so that real help could be many hours away.

This actually happened to me some years back returning from an APY Women's cultural camp south of Uluru. Rolling along in the minibus we suddenly lost all momentum and chugged to a standstill. The tour driver sheepishly told us we had run out of fuel. It was a hired bus and the operators had underestimated fuel consumption.

We were told that help was coming so we settled ourselves under some mulga trees. Inevitable conversations arose about how this driver could have made such a presumption that what was in the tank would be enough. It was hot and between the 12 of us we started to eye off each other's water bottles. Realizing we may have been guilty of the same oversight. Surely we had enough water between us? Yeah she'll be right mate..... they'll be here soon won't they?

Turns out our help car had taken a wrong turn and was lost searching for us on the wrong road. As night fell we lit a small fire watching for headlights and listened for the sound of a car.

Someone sparked up a rendition of singing in the rain but replaced the word rain with dark. Failed attempt to rhyme it out.

Truth was..., we were all unprepared.

You can't presume in the desert. You have to be prepared for anything because anything happens often.

The psalm and Amos reading set the stage for Matthews's story of the wise and foolish virgins

Psalm 78 1-7 where the lectionary ends it actually has its link to the ten virgins reading at verse 8 where Israel is warned not be stubborn and unprepared like their forefathers. **Because they would not listen**

A generation that was **found unprepared** in its heart for the LORD

And **Amos 5** speaks of Virgin Israel who was longing for the day of the LORD but missed it because she was distracted by other delights. **She was not listening to the instructions of the lord**

Lulled into a false sense of security she sat and sang in darkness not in light.

Israel was as we read in verse 23 singing in the dark. And the lord says enough of this singing

I've passed through the midst of you but you will not recognise me.

Stories of Israel not seeing and not hearing form the **hinterland** of Matthew's gospel.

In the parable of the ten Virgins.

From our much later New Testament viewpoint it's all too easy to pocket this as a story about the Bride of Christ, the church being ready for His return.

Endless reams have been written to try and nail down a time and place for Christ's return based on the signs Chapter 24.

But despite signs which we see all around us now - **we are clearly told that none knows the hour of Christ's final return.**

Matthew here is primarily concerned with talking to his fellow Jews, lamenting their repeated history of ignoring key moments where God had reached out to gather his bride and been rejected.

Chapter 23; 37 Jerusalem, Jerusalem!!!! **Why would you not listen to those I sent?**

Matthew is writing with the hindsight of the resurrection in Antioch where the two worlds of the synagogue and the emerging church collided and connected. We read of this in Matthew 16:18 Peter the founding rock of the church..... **The new bride was being prepared for the end of the age**

Matt 16:18

For Matthew it was their synagogue and my church

Back in Sunday school days. We used to make the narrative butterfly for this parable of the ten virgins

I wonder if you know it?

Two thumbs, 5 foolish virgins, and 5 wise virgins. One wing of the butterfly fluttering back into history of God's chosen people described as the often unfaithful bride in the book of Hosea.

And the other wing flutters towards the history of the new bride who must LISTEN to the warnings unlike her silly sisters.

Then we used to sing give me oil in my lamp keep me burning

For Matthew the temple had been destroyed in AD 70 just as Jesus predicted.

The temple of Jesus' body had been destroyed and raised up and the fledgling church arising from these events needed to find strength and vigilance as the new betrothed in waiting. The marriage contract had been signed and sealed with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

So Matthew delivers three parables of vigilance, watchfulness and wisdom in waiting.

Each parable also speaks of the responsible use of the gifts and virtues given to the church for the building of the kingdom of God.

Three short parables of vigilance during delay ...

The prudent servant 24:45-51

The prudent and thoughtless virgins

And the talents

The number 10 here is symbolic of the Jewish minyan where 10 people would be needed before prayer could begin.

The tradition of Jewish weddings

There was no courting. Marriages were arranged by contract. Parents would select partners for their children. The groom would then go to the bride's house and would draw up a legal contract of betrothal and a price would be agreed upon for her. Once betrothed the girl would take the veil.

The groom would return to his father's house to prepare a place for her.

In my father's house there are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you John 14:2-6

The new bride's home had to be up to standard and could take up to a year to prepare.

If you were to ask the groom when he would come to take his bride he would be obliged to answer

....No one knows the day or the hour of the wedding but my father (who decides if the place prepared for the couple was ready.)

Meanwhile back at the bride's house wedding preparations were underway as the time grew near.

The bride would select her bridesmaids.

Her unbetrothed attendants would wash, dress and attend to the bride to be. They would pack her bags for departure.

The custom was for the groom to come romantically at night and steal her away.

The job of the bridal party was to **LISTEN** for **the call** and wait at her house every night until he would come.

Watch therefore for you do not know the hour

The maids needed to have their lamps ready and burning because if the bride groom arrived it was their task to light the way along the paths to the groom's house. Lamps could be wicked vessels or rag soaked torches. They need regular soaking and topping up.

Each one of the virgins was responsible for the commodity of their own oil.

Exodus 27:20

Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives for the light so that the lamps may be kept burning. **It was the oil of the presence of the LORD at the tent of the meeting.**

Each one was **to listen for that call**

Each one was to be on watch for the presence of the bridegroom.

But the carrying of this oil and the listening was a common task. They were to be a community of light. A community of listeners.

But which night might the groom come?

It wasn't last night. Could it be tonight or maybe next week or month?

It's important to recall that **all of the bridesmaids** were expecting the groom.

They all knew the process. They all had the knowledge.

They all had the lamps. **With oil in them** ... They been handpicked for the job

And they all got sick of waiting and fell asleep.

When the groom did arrive he was obliged to give some kind of warning.

There would be the sound of the trumpet Blow the horns.

They would **listen for the call and go.**

But the foolish girls were not prepared with **enough oil** for the journey.

The wise refused to give oilnot for selfish reasons but through fear that they all might be able to fulfill their duty.

So the real issue in this parable is not having enough oil for the task.

The hapless /oil less/ foolish virgins are sent out by their teammates on an impossible task.

To buy oil from a merchant whose shop was closed. Where this precious commodity could not be found at this 11th hour watch of the night. When they did refuel it was too late.

Each one of us has been given an oil lamp of virtue to shine into the world.

This is how we light the way for the bridegroom in the presence of the Spirit.

To arrive every day to the threshold of our lives and the lives we touch.

This is not just about the end of the age; it's about faithfulness until the end of our age.

But how is this oil purchased? Isaiah 55: say it's a free gift to those who train their ear to the voice of the bridegroom.

Isaiah 55:1

It is purchased without money but there is a currency. It is purchased by listening to the WORD of the LORD.

Psalms 119: 105

The WORD of the LORD is a light unto our paths

It is the oil of instruction followed by the obedience of being prepared to act when the call comes.

Proverbs 6:23

For the commandment of the Lord is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life,

What commodity has the LORD given you? What brand of oil do you carry? If you don't know the specific virtue and gift given to you, ask the LORD to show you.

And here is a clue Spiritual gifts and talents when in the hands ordained by GOD to carry.... will reap another kind of oil.

The oil of JOY that banished the Spirit of heaviness.

What will you be found doing when the bridegroom comes to your morning to your day to your night. Would you recognise his voice if he called.

Revelation 3:20 the bridegroom says behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them and they with me.