

Wisdom and folly – Parables about waiting and being prepared – Paul Day

Matthew 24:45-51; Matthew 25:1-13; Mark 13:34-37; Luke 12:35-48

You can probably call to mind the story of King Solomon from the Old Testament. As he became king, God told him to ask for what he wanted. He didn't choose riches or wealth or possessions or long life – he chose wisdom. He knew that if he were to be the kind of king God wanted him to be then he would need a wisdom that came from God.

The book of Proverbs in the Old Testament is a collection of sayings about wisdom and folly, often attributed to King Solomon. Wisdom and folly are sometimes personified in the book – we read things like “Does not wisdom call, does not understanding raise her voice?” and “The foolish woman ... calls to those who pass by – You who are simple turn in here...”. Proverbs paints the picture of the lives of people like you and me being about choosing between wisdom and folly – wisdom being respecting and honouring God, and folly being turning away from God. One of the most well known verses in the book says “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”. Not fear is the sense of being afraid of, but respect, awe and recognition that God is God.

Today we have a collection of parables picking up themes of waiting, being alert and watchful and being wise. As we read them we can imagine the crowds listening to Jesus's words, and those words making them think about these traditions of wisdom and folly. Would they respond to the call of wisdom, or be lured away by pursuing folly?

So let's have a quick look at a couple of the parables. In Matthew chapter 24 we read of the wise and wicked servants. The master has gone away and left his servant in charge. The wise servant would be alert, working hard and waiting for his master to return; the wicked servant would take advantage of the master's absence – eating, drinking and mistreating his fellow servants. When the master returns unexpectedly the wise servant is richly rewarded, while the wicked servant is severely punished.

Matthew 25 tells us of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. They wait for the bridegroom – and interestingly all ten of them fall asleep. When the bridegroom arrives, five had been prepared and wisely had brought spare oil for their lamps; five had not. Those who had come prepared were admitted to the wedding feast, the other found their entry barred. The traditions

associated with middle eastern weddings might be confusing to us, but the message about being prepared and making wise decisions is clear.

The context of these parables is unclear. The passages where we find them appear on one level to be talking about the end times, but there are also hints that Jesus could be talking about the forthcoming destruction of the Temple – which happened in 70AD, just 30 or 40 years after the time of Jesus. In a sense it doesn't really matter – whatever the situation the message is about keeping eyes and ears open, and responding with the wisdom that comes from God.

But it is, I think, equally valid to understand these short parables to be about the way his teaching and ministry were being received. The Jewish people were expecting a Messiah figure. The prophets had pointed towards his coming, and the people were taught to be expectant. The trouble was that so many did not recognise Jesus. Although they were waiting, their eyes were closed or they were simply looking in the wrong place. They were expecting a conquering hero – and that wasn't the type of Messiah that Jesus was. Consequently, when Jesus the Messiah arrived he was missed by so many – only those in tune with the way God was acting recognised him.

Be on the lookout and make wise choices, says Jesus. We often confuse knowledge with wisdom, but that can be a great mistake. As they say knowledge means understanding that the tomato is a fruit and not a vegetable; wisdom says don't put it in the fruit salad.

But of course it is all too easy to say that wisdom is about respecting and honouring God, but what does that mean in practice for us. How can we make wise choices – choices that come from God?

The clue lies in the fact that as Christians we have the Holy Spirit, and, amongst other things, the Holy Spirit is described as the Spirit of Wisdom. If we listen to the promptings of the Spirit we listen to the promptings of God. Our choices will be truly wise if we are open to God.

This then brings the two aspects of the teaching in these parables together. Be alert to God's promptings which will give you wisdom. Watch and listen for the word of God that will guide you as you make decisions. Foolishness comes from not looking for or not listening to the voice of God. And this voice of God is made known to us in scripture, in words from others, through circumstance and sometimes through direct revelation. The vital thing is to recognise that voice however it comes, and to respond to it.