

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

It is with joy and thanksgiving to Almighty God that we welcome everyone to this, the Second Session of the Thirteenth Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Jos. For us, this is a special landmark, as we have now completed twenty-five years as Bishop of Jos, and are beginning our twenty-sixth year. When I was a small boy running around the streets of this city, stealing mangoes, scout camping and generally getting into all sorts of mischief, it would never have occurred to me or to anyone else that one day I would become Bishop and even Archbishop in this same city! For me, it is a particular cause for thanksgiving that this, St. Luke's Church - now Cathedral - was my home church, that I attended the Primary School here, and by God's grace have now come back to serve amongst you as Bishop in this same church and diocese. The stories of those early days are too many to recount now, and even the stories of the last twenty-five years are many and varied. But overriding them all is a great chorus of thanksgiving and praise! Sai godiya!

During our tenure here we have had the privilege of working with many different priests and catechists, but we wish to pay tribute today to the life and work of the present Vicar, the Ven. Prof. Pic Onwochei and his wife, Dupe. God has used them mightily to turn around the fortunes of the Cathedral and especially to set the finances in place. They are tireless workers, carrying big responsibilities at the University of Jos as well as within the diocese, and we thank God for their dedication, commitment and hard work, both in the Cathedral and the Diocese. Dupe has also proved herself to be a strong pillar of support, encouragement, guidance and sheer determination amongst the Mothers' Union, Women's Guild and Girls' Guild of the Diocese. We thank God for you both and pray for God's blessings upon you and your family.

A leader, however, is weak unless he has a good team working with him, and we do thank very much indeed the very many individuals and committees who have laboured relentlessly to transform this building and compound, as well as all who are still working to provide food, assistance in all sorts of ways, and to ensure that the whole compound is kept clean and tidy and that everything necessary for the smooth-running of the Synod is provided. The Church Wardens, Verger, Standing Committee, choir, ushers, musicians, decorators, cooks, office staff,

security personnel and so many others are far too many to name in person, but we thank you all most sincerely, and we pray that the Lord himself will bless and reward you.

We particularly welcome to this Synod our Preacher and Bible Study leader, the Rt. Rev. Timothy Yahaya and his wife, Esther. We first met and worked with Bishop Yahaya many years ago. He is a B.Sc. graduate of ABU Zaria, who was then sent to study for a P.G.D. in the Christian Institute Jos, from where he graduated in 1998. He is married to Esther, the mother of their three children and a graduate in Education. His call to serve the Lord and his passion for the mission of the gospel was evident even in those early days, and the intervening years have only served to increase and deepen that commitment. Having been Bishop of Jalingo Diocese for some years, he is now back as Bishop of Kaduna Diocese. My Lord, we do appreciate your carving out the time to be with us for our Synod and to bring the word of God to us.

INTRODUCTION

Our Synod consideration for this year is the story of the ten virgins or bridesmaids, as recorded in Matthew 25:1-13, and our main concern will be the lessons to be drawn from this parable concerning the end of time. In his book on St. Matthew's gospel Michael Green puts together chapters 24 and 25 as "The Fifth Discourse: Judgement Now and Then", and he looks at the end of Jerusalem and the end of time. In a similar way, it will not be out of place for us to look first at the background accounts in chapter 24 that lead to the discourse and the parable of the virgins in chapter 25 verses 1-13.

The scenario is that Jesus had been teaching in the Temple, and was now leaving the Temple when the disciples came to point out to him the buildings. There was a rabbinical saying that "you have seen nothing beautiful until you see Herod's Temple", and the disciples were probably curious as to why, despite all his visits to the Temple, Jesus had never said anything about the beauty of the Temple building. So they drew his attention to the superb white marble stones put together in a magnificent manner and making the building unlike any other in history. They called Jesus' attention to this historical beauty. The response of Jesus was, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (24:2). This saying opens up the discourse about the end time.

Let us note that the temptation of the disciples to glorify the past is not uncommon to man, and it is even more common for us to worship what we have built with our own hands. We pride ourselves on our achievements in building structures; we pride ourselves on our intellectual accomplishments, our material possessions, our beauties, and much more. The error of our pride is not that we do not know that one day these things will pass away, or will be destroyed or will decay. Our error is in refusing to believe that sooner or later this will actually happen. In our head we know that these things cannot last for ever, but we cannot bring ourselves to envisage their end. Whatever material things we build, no matter how much we may have invested in them, the assurance we receive from Jesus is that one day they will be destroyed.

If anyone ought to understand this, it should be us, the Christians in Plateau and the States in the central region of Nigeria and in the North-East. Here villages have been wiped out from the map of Nigeria; some churches structures may never be built again; thousands of lives have been destroyed; human history has been distorted, and communities destabilised with seemingly no end in sight. A combination of criminal elements, Boko Haram and Fulani herdsmen have overrun many Christian communities, leaving unbearable destruction behind them. Even in our own time we are witnesses to the beginnings of the end!

What cannot be destroyed, however, is anything and everything which has eternal value.

It is against this background that Jesus speaks of the future end of Jerusalem as well as of the end of time.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD / HEAVEN

The disciples asked him: "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Mt.24:3b) What will happen at "the end of the age", and what will happen to you and to me? Life? Death? Total unconsciousness? Joy? Sadness? This is a question not just about today or tomorrow, or next year, or ten years ahead. This question concerns eternity. This is the only truly important question. It is a question not about the things of this world; it is a question about the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus therefore answered them by saying,

"The Kingdom of Heaven will be like . . ."

The theme of the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of heaven, as Matthew usually puts it) is central to the life and teaching of Jesus. According to Mark's gospel, he began his ministry by proclaiming: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). (See also Lk11:20, 17:21, 21:31.) In other words, the Kingdom is already here because in Jesus God was now setting right the evil state into which the world had fallen, and was beginning to bring to fulfilment his original intention at creation.

The word usually translated as Kingdom (*Basileia*) means kingship, kingly rule, reign or sovereignty, and so the expression Kingdom of God denotes the sovereign Lordship or rule of God. Amidst the bad and sometimes evil rule of the Old Testament kings, the prophets had looked forward to the Day when God would once again establish his rule. With Jesus that day came. The signs of God's presence and of God's power can be seen in the teaching (especially the parables) and in the miracles of Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of God's perfect will, and so acceptance or rejection of Jesus is acceptance or rejection of the Kingdom of God.

This, however, is only one side of the coin. There is also a future element: we say in the Lord's Prayer: May your kingdom come (Mt 6:10, Lk 11:2). No matter how perfectly Jesus fulfilled God's will and purpose, the fullness of the Kingdom is yet to be seen and acknowledged. Jesus taught that we should "seek" the Kingdom (Mt.6:33), and work for its expansion. The seed of the Kingdom has been sown, but its full fruition is not yet. Like the seed, it would grow gradually in a way which was quiet and persistent and yet also revolutionary.

There is therefore a tension between what has "already" been accomplished, and what is still "not yet", for example:

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1:14)

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light (Rom 13:11-12).

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:22)

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. (Heb 2:8)

Michael Green puts it clearly:

The kingdom has come with the first coming of Jesus. It has been inaugurated, but it has not yet been consummated. Disciples are citizens of two countries. They belong both to this age and to the age to come. They live at the intersection of the ages. We are not what we were, but equally, we are not yet what we shall be. The kingdom inaugurated at the first coming of Jesus will be consummated by his return at the end of history. Then his will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven.¹

The early church expected that Christ would very quickly return in glory as King and judge, and so bring in the fulfilment of the Kingdom. Jesus' teaching, however, (as in Mt 25:1-13), makes it clear that no one knows when the return of Christ will be: it will be unexpected, but it may be today or in thousands of years' time.

Meanwhile the essential link between the "now" and the "not yet" is the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the sign that the new age has dawned (eg. John the Baptist said, "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Mark 1:8), and it is also the first fruits or pledge that the full harvest will follow. "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23).

At the Holy Communion we proclaim:

Christ has died!

Christ is risen!

Christ will come again!

The first two affirmations belong to what has already happened, and the third to the "not yet" of the future. However, it is because of what has already happened through the cross and resurrection that the glorious victorious return of Christ is certain. Of this the Spirit is a guarantee (2 Cor.5:5).

¹ Michael Green, *Matthew for Today*, 229

A. THE STORY : MATTHEW 25:1-13

In reply to the disciples' question about the end of the age, Jesus said:

“Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins rose 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, ‘Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

The setting for this story is a wedding. The virgins (or some versions say the bridesmaids) were to be part of a great procession and celebration. A wedding in a Jewish village in those days was a major event in which everyone took part, and the celebrations usually lasted for about a week. During those days the couple were treated like a prince and princess as everyone came and rejoiced with them. Whereas today the bridegroom comes first to the church and then awaits the coming of the bride, in those days it was the bride who was waiting for the coming of the bridegroom. Moreover, the timing of the groom's coming was not always specified: it might be later today, or it might be tomorrow, or even next week. He came unexpectedly, sometimes in the middle of the night! A man was sent ahead to shout, “The bridegroom is coming!” and the bridal party must be ready to go out and meet him. No-one, however, was allowed on the streets after dark without a lighted lamp.

All those listening to Jesus would therefore well understand the story as he told it. Ten girls were waiting, presumably with the bride (although we are told nothing about her). All ten had brought their lamps, but only five had brought extra oil (today we would talk of having spare batteries!). They had waited for a

long time, and had fallen asleep. Suddenly the shout was heard. The bridegroom was coming! Quickly they got up and made ready. By this time, however, their lamps were dying out. Those with the necessary extra oil quickly made their lamps bright again, but the other five were in trouble. They asked their companions to share their oil, but were told, "No, we can't do that; there will not be enough. Go quickly and buy some more for yourselves." The senseless ones had no option but to obey, and unfortunately for them the bridegroom arrived while they were away. When they came back the door was shut, and the groom himself refused to let them in, saying that he did not know them.

In the previous chapter Mathew had already emphasised that people would be divided into two groups: the sensible and the foolish. The sensible ones are like the faithful steward who lived and worked as his master required and so was ready when the master returned. The foolish got drunk, did nothing useful and were caught out by the master's unexpected return (Mt. 24:45-51). The sudden return of the master (or bridegroom) may be as unexpected as is the coming of a thief in the night (Mt 24:43-44). Those who are sensible survive - with joy. Those who are foolish miss out - and come to no good end.

The crucial point in our story is that five of the girls had prepared thoroughly and were ready, whereas the other five were not prepared. Whether they had left home in haste, or had decided to come at the last minute, or had been busy doing other things which seemed more important, or whatever the reason, or excuse, might be, they had been careless, thoughtless and had not given due priority and preparation to the matter in hand. It was their privilege to be invited and to be called to take part in the wedding procession, and it was their responsibility to be fully prepared so that their lamps could shine in the darkness and light the way. They failed. They asked their sisters to let them have some of their own oil, but what their sisters had could not be shared to all.

Jesus did not criticise the girls for going to sleep, as all ten of them had done. Proper and appropriate rest is necessary in life! When, however, the call for action comes, full preparation must already have been made so that the response can be immediate and whole-hearted. Jesus had said that this story was about the Kingdom of Heaven, and this chapter in Matthew's gospel goes on to emphasise the future return of the Son of Man, the division of people into two groups at his return, and the manner of life expected from those who truly belong to him. When the Son of Man (the Messiah, Jesus Christ) returns we must be ready and waiting for him. His return is not the moment for us to begin to prepare: the

preparation should already have been done, as the five foolish girls discovered to their cost.

The sensible girls could not share their oil: there are some things in life which cannot be shared or borrowed. Your call and commitment to Jesus Christ is one such thing. We must all work to ensure that others hear God's call, answer positively, and give their lives to Christ, but we cannot force anyone to do this, and we cannot answer for them. There is a point at which everyone must make a personal decision. We cannot borrow someone else's relationship with God. We cannot borrow someone else's character. The foolish girls had been half-hearted in their preparation. They had accepted the call to be a part of the wedding celebrations, but they had not taken it to heart. It is a sad fact that in our churches today there are many who sing and dance and clap, who come regularly to services, and yet have not committed their lives to the Lord. Their way of life contradicts what they say and sing in church. This is an urgent matter, because no-one knows when the Lord will return. We do not know the day or the hour (Mt.25:13). There are some things which cannot be obtained at the last minute. It is no use beginning to work in the morning for a major exam which is to come up later that same day! The only time and place to prepare is now - not when the Master / Bridegroom returns.

The really devastating punch line of this story comes at the end. The foolish girls returned, but to their horror the bridegroom had arrived in their absence and the door was now shut. They called out to him, thinking that he would authorise their admission. This was not a matter of talking to a security guard at the gate, and the girls did not even ask to see the bride. This whole story is about the girls' relationship with the bridegroom. The bridegroom responded to the girls outside, but did not call them in, as they expected. The door remained closed and his answer sealed their fate, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you" (25:12). The girls were left outside in the darkness, reminding us of the wedding guest who did not put on a wedding garment, and who was thrown out into the darkness (Mt.22:1-14).

No excuse was accepted. They had had their chance, and they had been careless, and were unprepared. They may have been dressed in fine clothes, and done everything to ensure that they looked beautiful and attractive on the outside, but in their hearts and their lives they were not ready. This is a serious warning because . . .

"The Kingdom of Heaven will be like . . ."

B. ENCOURAGEMENT

It is hard to think of waiting as encouragement, but it is. It is a call to wait, persevere and be a light in the darkness. It is the period of time to think, celebrate and strategize for the coming event. It is not a matter of waiting and doing nothing; it is a busy time of planning, getting things done and leaving nothing undone that should be done. Jesus tells this story to illustrate how in time and space we must use our time fruitfully.

i. Waiting

The bridesmaids did not know exactly when the bridegroom would appear; they just knew that he would come. Their calling was to wait. The waiting may have been long. Perhaps some of us would have given up and gone home! The waiting, however, and what we do with it, is important and life-changing. The timing is always in God's hands, and he calls us to wait for him, not to rush ahead in an effort to beat other people, or to go on useless detours in the bush, or to do nothing. "Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him Wait for the Lord, and keep to his way" (Ps.37:7, 34). No-one knows for how long, but Jesus said:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. (Mark 13:31-33)

Just before the ascension, the disciples persisted in their questioning: So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:6-7)

Whatever our calling may be, the waiting and the preparation time must be characterised by godly living. Jesus said: "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes" (Mt.24:45-46).

We may sometimes be tempted to think that it would surely be a lot easier if we were taken to heaven as soon as we receive salvation in Jesus Christ and we truly experience being born again! But we must wait, even though the waiting may sometimes be difficult and painful, involving suffering and persecution. We must not give up: we must maintain our vision and focus and press on. St. Paul, writing from his enforced “waiting” in prison said, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Phil 3:12). He was looking ahead and pressing on - even in prison.

ii. Perseverance

Most suffering Christians around the world will be able to relate with the context in which the disciples lived. It was not easy for the Jews in Palestine in those days. They were living under the rule of the Roman colonial power, and the Roman Empire had no soft spot for the Jews. They were stereotyped as a difficult people, characterised by riots, militancy and fanaticism. Because of this they had little chance of being given a reasonable ruler. A succession of kings in the lineage of Herod the Great is an example of this: every one was a murderer, including the one who had John the Baptist beheaded. Similarly when Jesus was born hundreds, if not thousands, of children were massacred, and Joseph and Mary had to flee to Egypt with the baby Jesus, as refugees. Similarly the Governor, Pontius Pilate, was harsh, spiteful and brutal and did not have a good service record. The Roman law enforcement agencies gave the Jews no breathing space at all. Jews could not get together openly; their celebrations needed permits; they were not free as freedom is known today. Their human rights were abused and few and far between, and existed only if you were fortunate enough to have a humane local military officer. They were constantly under watch. A Jew did not qualify for justice in those days.

After Pentecost this situation was compounded. The new movement created by God at Pentecost, known as the Church, the Body of Christ, was first of all Jewish. If being a Jew was bad, being a Christian Jew was worse because the persecution of the church was first introduced by the persecuted Jews themselves. So a Jewish Christian suffered persecution twice over: from the Jews and from the Roman government. The disciples in their generation were therefore looking for and anticipating the coming of “That Day” when they would be free. When would the Messiah come and set them free, restore their humanity, and bring in the rule of God where there will be justice, righteousness and peace? This state of affairs will be very well understood today by the church in persecuted areas of the world,

and will be immediately appreciated by Christians in Plateau, Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba States and in the whole of the North-East of Nigeria. The cry and prayer of believers is: when will this end? When will all this evil stop? When will the children of God be free? We are encouraged in Scripture to endure all hardships and persevere to the end (Acts 14:21-22). Jesus' response to us is the same as it was to the disciples:

"The Kingdom of Heaven will be like . . ."

iii. The Light

The story in Matthew 25:1-13 implies that the girls all knew that they each had to carry a light, and this was necessary because they did not know the time or the hour when the bridegroom would come. Presumably they began to celebrate in the evening - with no electricity or generator! The torches would light the road and also ensure that the groom could be seen and that the correct person was welcomed.

The Psalms remind us that "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105), and Jesus himself said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12). Light is a major theme running throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. In Genesis chapter 1 we hear how God created light before anything else; the creation of all else depends upon light. At the other end of the Bible, Revelation brings a great vision of the City of God where not even sun or moon is needed because the glory of God is the light (Rev. 21:23-24).

When God created the world all was good and perfect. Man walked in the light of perfection in the Garden of Eden. God delighted to walk in fellowship with man, until one evening God called for man to join him - and man was hiding from the light of God. Sin had entered and man now ran from the light. Man's relationship with God was spoiled. The light of God continued to shine, however, for those who could see. The prophets and the faithful remnant walked in the light while "the land of Egypt" (the godless) remained in darkness.

Eventually God sent his Son who is the Life and the Light. St. John makes this clear in the prologue to his gospel and chapter 9 brings the confirmation of this as Jesus heals the man born blind. In John 12 we read:

So Jesus said to them, “The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light. . . . I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.” (John 12:35-36, 46)

Jesus came into the world as the Light of the world. His whole life shed light into people’s lives, into situations, problems, traditions, and also into religious faith and religious practices. Wherever Jesus went and was accepted, situations which had seemed impossible were resolved; healing took place; forgiveness and peace replaced bitterness and fear. When a light is shone into a dark room, the darkness must go; the darkness cannot put out the light. Therefore those who follow Jesus will walk in light and not in darkness; the light of Christ will lead them and guide them.

In Matthew 25:1-13 the call to the bridesmaids to carry the light amid the darkness is therefore a very high responsibility and honour. It was their duty to ensure that the light never went out. Five of them failed in this. Remember:

“The Kingdom of Heaven will be like . . .”

If you are given a position of responsibility, honour and dignity, you will usually value this and the last thing you would want would be to allow yourself to be put down; in fact you will hate anything that could bring you down. It is my earnest prayer and wish that Christians would value their calling in the highest way possible. If only those who call themselves Christians would truly take the path of becoming disciples of Jesus Christ and recognise the enormous value of their salvation, the value and place of the Holy Spirit; if only they would intentionally place great value on abiding in Christ, then through the power of the Holy Spirit they would give light to the world. Moreover, it is such intentional, total and consistent commitment to Christ that is the guarantee and security that the oil of the lamp never goes out.

The person who has been so honoured with this invitation must carry the light, and not only needs to make sure that the light does not go out, but should also keep an extra supply of oil, knowing fully well that it will be needed. For the girls in the parable, the light they would have carried outside in those days was provided by a collection of rags tied on to a stick. These rags needed oil in order

for them to burn. Without both the oil and the person to put the oil on the rags, what is supposed to be a light is just a collection of rags tied to a stick. Unfortunately, many Christians are like that. They are in church, but ineffective in church, ineffective in society and their family life is poor. Such Christians have great potential, but their lives are in no way different from those who have never known the gospel at all. They may be Christians because they come from Christian families or because going to church is a convenient or culturally correct thing to do. In fact their lives have not been soaked with the oil of the gospel and therefore they are just like the dry rags and the stick - they shed no light. We are called to wait, persevere, and be the light in this dark world.

Jesus warns against such because darkness is a horrible thing. A marriage conducted in darkness is unimaginable: when daylight breaks, what would it reveal! In the morning Jacob discovered that he had the wrong bride, he had Leah instead of Rachel, and it took him another seven years to get what he wanted. So disastrous is darkness that you will always stumble and fall, hit your head and sustain injuries. This, it must be said, is a description of many "Christian" lives in the church today. It is for this reason that Jesus in this parable warns the disciples and us that . . .

"The Kingdom of Heaven will be like . . ."

*Give me oil in my lamp
Keep me burning;
Give me oil in my lamp, I Pray;
Give me oil in my lamp
Keep me burning;
Keep me burning till the break of day.
Sing Hosanna! Sing Hosanna!
Sing Hosanna to the King of kings;
Sing hosanna! Sing Hosanna!
Sing Hosanna to the King.*

We are encouraged to wait, persevere and keep our light burning!

C. WARNING

i. Privileges and Responsibilities

Jesus tells this parable both to encourage and to warn the disciples. He sets the story in a context they would easily understand. For this wedding ten girls were given privileged positions of honour by the bride and they were approved by the bridegroom. Nigerians would enjoy this kind of thing! Others make fun of Nigerians as people who love recognition and being placed on the High Table. There is even a Ghanaian joke about three Nigerians who went missing in the wilderness: the first man decided he would be the Chairman of the Missing committee, the second said he would be the Secretary and the third claimed the post of Chairman of the Followers committee! To seek to be recognised and to be in a position of honour and dignity may not be totally bad, but it comes with huge responsibilities.

he [God] raised him[Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. (Eph.1:20-21)

when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. (Eph 1:3-4)

Christ has been exalted to the highest place in heaven and through him God has given us so many blessings - which we so easily forget! And all these blessings stem from the greatest miracle and blessing of them all - the astonishing fact that "God chose us" (Ephesians 1:4). God chose us to be his people, to be faultless and full of love, to be adopted as his children "through Jesus Christ".

All powers, authorities and dominions are subject to Christ, now and for ever. Christ is the head of the church, and the church is his body. The body cannot operate apart from the head, and the head needs to work through the body. The church has her source, her foundation, her very life, in Christ, and she exists as Christ lives and works through her. The power and the resources which raised Christ from the dead are available to Christians too.

This is how honoured we have been made by Jesus! We have become his representatives on earth and we will be with him in heaven! We are therefore those who will show the world who God in Christ is. We are the pioneers in mission. We are to proclaim Christ and to demonstrate his power over all evil, setting the oppressed free, healing the sick in mind and body. We are the ones to celebrate Christ in his risen power daily. We bring spiritual and physical development, transformation and revival of communities and people everywhere. The virgins had, in the same way, been carefully chosen and given the place of highest honour in the wedding and banquet! Five valued their position and responsibility; five threw it away.

ii. The Bride

As we write this Charge we are giving away our daughter in marriage. It is easy to see and relate with the story of these ten virgins. It is a week to the wedding, but preparations began six months ago. From the time the cards came out a month ago we have had streams of visitors. Two weeks to the wedding our house was full. It will be difficult for a western reader to imagine that my house right now has over 70 people staying in the house with us until the wedding date which is still two weeks ahead. After the wedding there will then be that number of people cleaning up for another week before they disperse.

The wedding will take place in Abuja. Our older sister-in-law lives in Abuja with some of our other relatives. Our immediate younger sister lives in America with our other younger sister. This one wedding has three cities planning for the event: Mankato (USA), Abuja, where our in-laws have their base, and Jos. My wife's relatives in Numan in Adamawa State (eight hours away by road) have organised themselves to support my wife in sending off our daughter. This convergence of people and plans will culminate on Thursday, three days to the wedding date, when a convoy of vehicles will travel from Jos to Abuja, accompanied by traditional dancers, well-wishers and sometimes people who know nothing about the wedding might jump on board one of the buses and go for the wedding. It must be said that before the wedding the foot traffic in our house of persons coming to rejoice with us is not less than 50 persons each day. This gives me a vivid picture of Jesus' parable of the ten virgins. The outstanding characteristic of all the planners, and of those coming to wish us well and to rejoice with us from all over the world is an inexplicable joy, marked by

enthusiasm to bring goodwill and determination to be useful and helpful in all the preparations for the wedding.

That precisely is the point for the ten virgins waiting for the time when the bridegroom will appear. It is not a boring time of waiting. It is not a time for doing other things outside the wedding preparations. The main focus of the two families is in doing everything in preparation and readiness for the wedding and the appearance of the bridegroom.

I have observed from my readings and from life's experiences that the men and women who have transformed societies, brought about change in communities, turned around the hearts of men and women to Jesus Christ, and made the greatest spiritual and physical impact leading to revivals and long-lasting gospel re-awakenings, have seen men and women who have consistently carried the gospel with joy to places where nobody else wants to go. They have taken the risk for the sake of the gospel to go to forgotten areas of the world in order to bring people to Christ. These kinds of people are those who have run the race and are running with a sense of urgency and are enthusiastic about the message they carry. They do everything possible to get everybody ready for the return of the bridegroom. These kinds of people are not ashamed to humble themselves first, to deny themselves and to labour and work very hard in the mission field, in the city, in the village and anywhere they are called to serve, be it through teaching, administration, health care, music, leadership or whatever is needed. They will do all they can until every lamp is burning, waiting for the coming of the bridegroom.

These people will wash the wounds of the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the poor, shelter the homeless, bring hope to widows and build communities, militate against evil to set captives and the oppressed free, with the sole aim of getting them ready for the coming of the bridegroom. Those who have their eyes fixed on this second coming also have their ears open for the cry, "Behold, here comes the bridegroom!" Their sleep is little, their expectations high. This is so because despite all that is happening in the world around us and beyond, one thing and one thing only is certain: Jesus will return and history will be culminated with the coming of the bridegroom.

"The Kingdom of Heaven will be like . . ."

iii. The Delay

Jesus says that for some reason the bridegroom delayed. Thank God he delayed! It could be conjectured that the bridegroom sent to find out if all things were ready. The first report was not encouraging. He sent again and sent several times until he finally made up his mind to delay no longer. The delay was to give them time to clean up, prepare themselves and take the occasion far more seriously than they had been doing. The delay did not mean that he was not coming: the delay of the bridegroom was in no way a cancellation of the occasion. In fact, the delay was useful because the bridegroom would want to meet a perfect bride. St. John, in Revelation 21, gives us a picture of such a bride:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Revelation 21:1-2)

The Old Testament had sometimes referred to God's relationship with his people as a marriage covenant, and Hosea's drama with his wife is a picture of God's relationship with his bride, Israel. Jesus, taking over this picture, occasionally referred to himself as the bridegroom:

Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. (Mark 2:18-20)

Paul takes up this picture in Ephesians, as he emphasizes the sacrificial love and commitment of Christ to his bride:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Eph. 5:25-27)

In the words of John Stott:

The church's head is the church's bridegroom He sacrificed himself to serve her, in order that she might become everything he longs for her to be, namely herself in the fullness of her glory.²

That is the vision.

"The Kingdom of Heaven will be like . . ."

D. JUDGEMENT

The teaching about the righteousness, justice and judgement of God is no longer being taught or discussed as an intrinsic part of the gospel in many churches today. Even when this topic does arise it is usually focused on God's judgement of armed robbers, murderers, exposed corrupt senior figures in society, people who do not belong to a church and so on. In other words, judgement is thought of as applying to someone else; it is something we will watch; it does not apply to "me". This way of thinking is not new. Over and again the Old Testament prophets had warned Israel that God's judgement was coming, and would not be exclusively for other nations: it would include the people of Israel. Isaiah, Amos and Malachi cautioned Israel in this regard.

In Matthew chapters 24 and 25 Jesus was making the point to everyone that, firstly, there will be judgement; secondly, that everyone will account for how they used the grace, time and gifts each person had received, and, thirdly, that what you did or did not do with that grace will determine your fate on the day of judgement. This is a unilateral standard across gender, race, age and nation: everyone, absolutely everyone, will be either a sheep or a goat (Mt.25:31-40).

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man brings the same kind of teaching (Luke 16:19-31). The religiosity and the religious practices of the rich man did not save him. Indeed it could be said that hell is not so much about fire as about the regrets of missed opportunities to do good - and the rich man was careless and blind.

In our story of the bridesmaids we see the setting of a wedding banquet and we see Jesus drawing the attention of his hearers to the universality of the context, making it clear that the human race is very dear to God and God has a

² John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 229

special place for every human being he has created (John 3:16). God's plan is for a banquet which is eternal, full of joy and a time and place where there will be no more weeping or tears. God himself will be in the midst of his people, as is described in Revelation 21:3-4:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

God is the one making the offer of a place at the banquet in the Kingdom of heaven, and he is holding out the invitation to all who will come:

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13).

Who would turn down this kind of offer! Who would take this offer for granted! Who would make light of this offer and be careless! Perhaps such people are listening, perhaps some are here today - or they may be far away. But everyone needs to be warned because when the bridegroom comes and the door is shut, the bridegroom is adamant and ruthless, saying, "I do not know you" (Mt 25:10b-12). The eternal finality of that verdict is so terrible that we cannot even think that it might one day be said to us. The truth, however, is that God's judgement is universal. It applies to bishops, clergy, catechists and laity, to Kings, Queens, politicians, businessmen, traders, servants and refugees. The rank or status which the world may give is of no importance whatsoever. It applies to those who murder and steal and also to the pickpockets in the market, to those who put rotten tomatoes at the bottom of the basket, to those who sell fake drugs, faulty spare parts, to nurses who steal drugs or give wrong medications, to carpenters, electricians, mechanics and all whose workmanship is bad, faulty and unreliable. No single person in the world is exempt from God's judgement.

All such evil behaviour is usually brought about by one or more of three factors: carelessness, laziness or self-deceit. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have heard the gospel, and who are free to gather and worship God regularly, easily begin to take the Word of God for granted. Our quiet times, daily prayer and Bible study are no longer a priority: "we can do it another time!" so we think.

Sadly, however, as we neglect God, so we draw ourselves away from God, we find that the joy of his presence has gone, and we end up regarding faith as, at best, an optional extra.

This downward spiral in our relationship with God is made worse by laziness. We become focused primarily on ourselves and cannot be bothered about God or anyone else. We become arrogant, self-righteous and self-serving, no longer open to advice or guidance, and seeking only our own comfort or position. This opens the door to self-deceit, as we give way to cheating, stealing, bribery, deception and corruption of all kinds.

The devil is the grand master of the art of “419” deception. Before He began his ministry Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. The tools the devil used on that occasion were verses from the word of God, verses which he so twisted that their original meaning was turned upside down. He still employs the same tactics today. There is a tension in the word of God between the discipline and anger of God, and the universal love of God. The bridegroom shut the door in the face of the careless bridesmaids, but many other verses emphasise the love and mercy of God, for example:

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? (Ezekiel 18:23)

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

Such verses about God’s patience and love can be misinterpreted to bring about a false complacency, seen in attitudes such as: “If necessary, I can repent later”; “it will all be alright in the end”; “it doesn’t matter - God understands”. God does understand - only too well! God knows the whole story of our lives, not just the parts that we want him to see. He does indeed want us to turn from our evil ways and live, but we must do that *before* we can appreciate and accept the forgiveness and the love which he is holding out to us. An armed robber who has just shot the householder and made off with his goods cannot immediately rejoice in the love and forgiveness of God - unless and until he repents. If he were to claim the love of God without repenting, it would be like “hot burning coals on his head” (Romans 12:20).

For those who truly repent, however (no matter how small or how terrible their sin may be in the eyes of the world), the joy and the peace of the love and

forgiveness of God is a reality which is beyond description. Those who know this are those who are then filled with a passion to bring other people the Lord, to establish righteousness, justice and freedom, to make peace between man and God and between man and man.

Are you ready when the Lord shall come?

Are you ready when the Lord shall come?

In the morning six o'clock,

In the evening six o'clock,

Are you ready when the Lord shall come?

CONCLUSION

"The Kingdom of Heaven will be like . . ."

At every funeral, and many times in between, we wonder what it will be like after death. Jesus encourages us and he warns us. He gives us vivid pictures which can teach us and guide us. We are assured of his position in heaven as King of kings and Lord of lords, and each one of us is challenged by him to follow him and to so live for him in this life that we will be with him for ever in heaven. To be called to follow Jesus is so simple, and yet it is the greatest honour on earth; it is the one and only thing in this life which will continue into the next life.

A wedding banquet is a very joyous occasion but Jesus used such an occasion to tell this parable and to show two very different possible eternal outcomes. There was a happy ending for those five bridesmaids who were wise in waiting, took seriously the warning of not knowing when the bridegroom would come, and made all due preparations to ensure that they would be inside the banquet hall. On the other hand, there were five bridesmaids who ended the day full of regrets, in pain and very sad - all because of their negligence, carelessness and their taking the occasion for granted.

Jesus is coming back.

Are YOU ready?

++The Most Rev. Dr. Benjamin A. Kwashi
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