

Ephesians 6:13-18 Matthew 25:1-13

The scene as depicted by Jesus in this Gospel passage is a scene which could have happened at any time in a Palestinian village and which could still happen today.

A wedding was a great occasion. The whole village turned out to accompany the couple to their new home, and they went by the longest possible route, in order that they might receive the good wishes of as many people as possible.

The point of this story lies in the Jewish custom which is very different from anything we know. When a couple marries, they did not go away for a honeymoon; they stayed at home. For a week they kept open house. They were treated like royalty. It was their chosen friends that were invited to take part in these festivities.

Now in terms of the wedding itself, this could happen at any time, and one of the great things to do at a middle-class wedding, if you could, was to catch the bridal party napping. So the bridegroom comes unexpectedly, and sometimes late at night. He is required to send a man along the street to shout, 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming!' But that might happen at any time, so the bridal party have to be ready to go out into the street and meet him.

It must also be remembered that no one is allowed on the streets after dark without a lamp, and also that, once the bridegroom has arrived, and the door has been shut, late-comers to the ceremony are not admitted. And so in this case, the foolish bridesmaids who were not prepared missed out.

Like so many of Jesus' parables, this one has an immediate and a local meaning, and also a wider and universal meaning. In its immediate context, it was directed at the Jews. They were the chosen people; their whole history should have been a preparation for the coming of the Son of God; they ought to have been prepared for him when he came. Instead, they were quite unprepared, and so they missed out.

Then there is arguably the more important meaning, the universal message for us all. We need to prepare ourselves for a relationship with the Son of God. As we have said before, building a relationship with Jesus is like building anything significant – it is hard work, very hard work. If we are not prepared to put in the hard yards, it is simply not going to happen.

So if my purpose is to build a relationship with God, how would I go about it? What do I have to do? Well, there are a few things I could and should do, but there is one thing especially, and to illustrate that, let me tell you a story.

A man was sleeping one night in his cabin when he was suddenly woken by a bright light that filled his room and God appeared to him. The Lord told the man he had work for him to do, and showed him a large boulder in front of his cabin. The Lord explained that the man was to push against the boulder with all his might. So this is what the man did, day after day.

For months he toiled each day, his shoulders set squarely against the massive boulder, pushing with all his might. Each night the man returned to his cabin exhausted, his body aching from all the pushing. The boulder, however, never budged and the man was getting quite discouraged.

In the end, the man prayed to God, 'Lord,' he said, 'I have laboured hard and long in your service, putting all my strength into what you have asked me to do. Yet, after all this time, I have not managed to move the boulder one millimetre. What is wrong? Why am I failing?'

The Lord replied, 'My friend, when I asked you to serve me and you accepted, I told you that your task was to push against the boulder with all your strength, which you have done. Never once did I mention to you that I expected you to move it. Your task was to push. And now you come to me thinking you have failed. But look at yourself. Your arms and back are strong and muscled. Your legs have become massive. You are a different person.'

'True, you haven't moved the boulder, but your call was to be obedient and to have faith in what I asked you to do. You have done that. Now, I will move the boulder for you.'

This story is about P.U.S.H. What does this stand for? Pray Until Something Happens. Whether it is a relationship with God, or whether it is something significant we want to achieve in life, or just dealing with life's challenges, pray, pray, pray, or should I say PUSH, PUSH, PUSH.

I refer to our reading from Ephesians, '*Pray at all times and on every occasion in the power of the Holy Spirit. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers.*' There is also that wonderful passage in Luke, '*And so I tell you, keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on seeking and you will find. Keep on knocking and the door will be opened for you.*' Luke 11:9.

One of the important things about perseverance with prayer is that it shows that we are genuine; it shows that we are deeply rooted in our relationship with God. This is not a fly-by-night relationship; this is a 'in for the long haul' relationship, and that means that it is genuine, and that in turn means that God is going to be far more receptive to our pleas.

There is the story of the sea captain, who in a terrible storm feared for the safety of his passengers. He asked if anyone knew how to pray. No one volunteered, so the captain took it upon himself to seek God's protection. His opening words were, 'God, I've never bothered you before, and if you help us through this storm, I'll never bother you again.' I'm not sure that's quite the right way of going about getting onside with God and basking in his blessings. In fact, I know it's not!

The final point I want to make is that anything in life worth achieving, we invariably have to work very hard for; we have to put in the hard yards. Ask anyone who has reached the very top in any field of endeavour. They will tell you that only through perseverance, through sweat and invariably a degree of pain, do they attain their goal. My friends, if our goal is a lasting and meaningful relationship with God, then the same applies.

One assumes that because we are gathered here this morning, we are intent on that relationship. So that means we have to work at it, because it is not going to just happen on its own accord. We need to do the groundwork. One very good way of doing that is through prayer. PUSH. PUSH PUSH!

I finish with a very interesting and insightful quote from William McGill, American psychologist and author, '*The value of persistent prayer is not that He will hear us, but that we will finally hear Him.*'

Rev Warner Wilder