

What great readings for our Mother's day service with baptism.

We are going to focus on the parable, as we come towards the end of our series – but first a few thoughts about proverb 31...A wife of noble character. Who can find?

I don't know about you, ladies, but when I read this Proverb, Proverbs 31, I squirm a little - how could I ever live up to this superwoman,

She is reliable, trustworthy, and supportive

She works really hard, from morning to night

She is a good financial manager -

She helped the poor and the needy

She teaches others with faithful instruction. She's just amazing.

She's exactly what little Toni needs. And men wouldn't it be great to have a wife like that ...so you can spend all day sitting at the city gate chatting to your mates?

But ladies, can we really attain such perfection? Can we really become that superwoman or super mum? Surely, God's wouldn't set up a standard that is impossible for us to attain? Would he?

But, hang on a minute, didn't Jesus say in Matthew 5:48 *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* And what about 1 Peter 1:16 *'Be holy, because I am Holy'*.

God **does** set a high bar for us, and that's for all of us, not just the women!

Our solution, to a seemingly impossible goal, is so often to lower the bar., isn't it? Because we know we can't be that good...

God's solution, however is to provide us with the power we need to reach that bar.

So, how do we begin to access the power we need to attain that high bar, that goal...Because without help – none of us can reach the bar, the perfection that God calls us to.

The answer comes right at the beginning of the book of Proverbs, and again here, right at the very end of the final Proverb.

Proverb 1: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom

Proverb 31: the woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

So, we begin to access the power we need by fearing the Lord.

The Fear of the Lord –is not being afraid of God, expecting him to beat you every time you get something wrong, no! The fear of the Lord is being in awe of Him, having the greatest respect for Him and giving him all the honour 24/7, not just on Sundays. In awe of his mighty power that created the universe, in awe of the mighty power that raised his son from death to life. That's the fear of the Lord.

Living our lives with God at the very centre of all we do, gives us the strength we need to do seemingly impossible things...

And as with our Proverbs 31 wife, we can all:

Find an inner security – that is able to laugh at the days to come.

We can all grow in wisdom – for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And we can all know the blessing of both those around us and ultimately from God.

And he will bless you and empower us to be better than we are. Amen

And so, onto our parable in Luke 12.

We're nearly at the end of our series on the parables of Jesus, considering them through the eyes of the theologian Kenneth Bailey. For those of you who have journeyed with us through these parables, you will recognise that Ken Bailey often brings insights that are different to our usual understanding, because of his deep knowledge of Middle Eastern culture. This well-known parable about servants being ready for their

master's return from the wedding banquet is usually named Watchfulness with the interpretation of us being ready for the second coming of Jesus. But there is so much more to this parable, so let's take a dive in.

It starts with v35 where the NIV translation says *'Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning,'* What does it mean to be dressed for service?

The long robes of Middle East worn by both men and women nearly touched the ground. They were generally worn without belts. The hot climate made loose fitting clothes the usual preference. However, any activity, would need some adjustment of the robe, so they didn't trip over.– we remember the father picking up his robes as he ran towards the prodigal son.

For those doing work they would wear a belt or rope around the waist to keep the bottom edge of the robe off the ground.

So here we have a group of servants, or actually in our parable is the word is Douloi – or slaves, waiting up into the night, dressed appropriately, ready for action, with the lamps alight.

The servants are waiting **expectantly** – they are expecting the master at some point to return from the feast. Interestingly, the word 'return' is better translated as 'withdraw'. So, the verse reads, The slaves are **expectant** for the master who will **withdraw** from the wedding banquet in order to come to them.

You see, the banquet is still going on. The master hasn't come home because the wedding has finished but he has withdrawn from the festivities in order to come home. Why is this?

The story unfolds...The master comes and knocks at the door.

V36 says *'when he comes and knocks, they can immediately open the door for him.'*

The master comes to his own house and knocks?!! Why would he knock? Apparently, only strangers knock at night in Middle Eastern culture. It would have been the normal custom to call out – remember the story of the man who had unexpected guests who went to his friend and **called out** – 'do you have any bread for my guests?' So, if the master wanted to let them know he was arriving he could have called out. Calling out would let them know who he was, and so they wouldn't be frightened it was a stranger. 'Open the door, I'm coming home..'So why did he knock?

Well, you see, he had left the banquet early, and probably didn't want everyone to know. So he didn't shout. If he just whispered, maybe the servants would not have heard him. So he quietly knocks, fully expectant that his servants are awake and ready to receive him.

The next question we need to ask is – so why did he leave the party early?

This is the central point to this parable. We need to understand, to appreciate the most amazing, the most astounding reason why the master returned. Here's v 37 it says...*Truly I tell you, [bible speak for – listen up because this is important] he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them.*

Who is the **he** in this passage? The master of the household

Who is the **them** in this passage? The slaves.

He, the master, will dress himself to **serve**, [put a belt on] and will have **them**, the slaves, recline at the table. The master has slipped away from the banquet **in order to** serve food to his slaves.

This is remarkable, unheard of, completely atypical and unexpected behaviour in this culture.

And would be quite scandalous to the hearer. And who was Jesus talking to, at the time? Not the Pharisees but the disciples – his followers...

What are the slaves going to eat? There would be no food already prepared, because the slaves knew their master was at a wedding feast – so he wouldn't be hungry.

There's no suggestion that anyone scurried off into the kitchen to start cooking – no, he asks his slaves to sit, and he served them. So, the logical explanation is that the master brought food from the banquet itself, to ensure his slaves could enjoy the wedding feast and be part of it.

Now, he could easily have sent a servant off from the banquet with a tray of leftovers for the slaves – but he chose to come **himself** and serve.

We are beginning to see the big picture, an underlying message in this parable.

What is the wedding banquet? – It's a picture of heaven – Who is the master that serves? – well that's Jesus – God in human form comes to earth not to **be** served, but to serve.

As we approach Easter – we remember that on the night he was betrayed, at supper with his friends...he wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the disciples' feet – taking on the role of a slave.

He serves those who are waiting expectantly. And he serves them with a taste of heaven.

At the last supper, the food Jesus gave his disciples was bread and wine. Jesus sharing his very self.

This is my body, he said, that is given to you – eat in remembrance of me

This is my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sin – drink this all of you in remembrance of me.

This parable is packed full of imagery...

There are images of incarnation – God coming in human form - in Jesus, coming from heaven to earth.

Sharing a piece of heaven with the lowest of the low.

There are images of atonement, of forgiveness – Christ offering himself, sharing himself, serving himself, to the unworthy, so they could share in the banquet.

And there are images of the eschaton, the end times, when we, who are waiting expectantly, will share in the heavenly banquet.

And finally, verse 38 in the NIV translation says *'It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or toward daybreak.'*

the word 'good' here is **Makarios**, which means blessed. Blessed are those who are found ready. Indeed, they wait, knowing they are already blessed and so they are willing and prepared to wait for the master's coming even if they have to wait a long time.

They wait expectantly, and they are further blessed, **when** the master returns.

The slaves are rewarded for their **faithfulness**, not their productivity.

They don't need to earn their master's blessing, they are already blessed, and because of their waiting, they are blessed even more abundantly.

What do we draw out of this parable for you and me today? For those who know Jesus, know this... you are already blessed. Blessed, because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus who has delt with our sins, brings us himself as a taste of heaven. So Remain blessed.

For those who know Jesus, you are Blessed with the indwelling of his Holy Spirit who brings guidance and wisdom, love and peace now. Remain blessed.

For those who know Jesus, you are Blessed with a fellowship here at All Saints who, though imperfect, journey together in faith, wait together in faith, grow together in faith, knowing Jesus will return.

So that we can indeed remain faithful to the end, it's not about how much we do, but our faithfulness to God.

Like the perfect wife, who, because of her fear of the Lord, her understanding of his greatness, his love, his amazing grace, gives him all the honour and knows his blessing. As we acknowledge that blessing, he will bless us further and empower us to be better than we are. And yes, we remain expectant of perfection at the second coming of Jesus who will put all things right. Praise the Lord. Amen.