

The line at the end of this parable is rather typical of Matthew's summary statements: *Stay awake!* - worthy and memorable, but actually quite off the point. There are wise bridesmaids, and there are foolish ones; but the wise ones do not stay awake -which would have been foolish -but go sensibly to sleep; they are going to need all their vim and vigour for the party which lies -rather a long way -ahead. What differentiates them from their foolish sisters is the amount of oil they have laid in. They are here for the duration..

I'm always struck by the zany atmosphere of this wedding. I'm specially impressed by the open-all-hours availability of oil shops after midnight! Apparently Middle Eastern marriage customs make the story less unlikely. The time immediately before the wedding is spent in negotiations about the marriage settlement; it's seen as appropriate for the bride's family not to want to let her go, and for the bridegroom to be terribly insistent; so good form would be for these negotiations to be very protracted. So we shouldn't assume that the ladies involved -bride and bridesmaids -are any less enthusiastic for the midnight scenario.

How should we think of this symbol of the oil?

Here our feeling about the strangeness of the story comes in very precisely. Christians are people who may fall asleep like anyone else in this hard-working world. But they are still waiting for something awesome to happen. We do not live shapelessly, waiting for the next disaster to plunge us into chaos. We live in the expectancy of people who have been promised to. We say three times a day, *Your kingdom come -your will be done here on earth!*

It must therefore be easy to read in us the feeling that we know where we're heading, and that we know how to live whilst we're waiting. People who are about to inherit a fortune must live fortunate lives, generous and positive. People who are about to inherit a kingdom must be spectacularly generous. And people who are invited to the Messianic Banquet must be ready to rise, with their light shining brightly and their best clothes looking good, festive and radiant when the bridegroom arrives.