

Reading: Matthew 25: 1-13

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know
the day or the hour.” (vs 13)

Theme: “Re-affirming our faith – be prepared”

Introduction

Let’s begin with a general word about the setting of today’s Gospel. Jesus is in his final week of earthly ministry. He is not speaking to his opponents or even to the general crowd. Rather he is sharing with the disciples or would be disciples. There are three parables in Matthew 25, one for each of the final weeks of the Lectionary year before the coming of the new year which begins with Advent. Matthew sets these three parables in the context of the future comings of the Son of Man. The Holy One who comes to consummate the Kingdom of God on earth. Today’s parable is about being alert and ready for those possibilities. Next Sunday takes up the theme of being diligent and trustworthy servants of the Kingdom and being ready to give account of what you have done. The last Sunday of the Lectionary Year features the King who comes incognito as we are called to show practical love to those in need around us – will we be found wanting!? It is good to be reminded that this parable has a specific setting and relates to, in a sense, ‘the faithful’ – those who know Jesus’ teaching.

Hence this is for all of us gathered together today!

The parable of the five wise and the five foolish women

Jesus told this parable in quite a different cultural setting and to begin to understand it we need to recognise aspects of Jesus’ time and customs. Today we expect the bridesmaids to look after the bride – that is their job. Also the bride and groom set a date and time for their wedding although sometimes the bride is known to be a little late!! Very different in Jesus’ time. The wedding could happen at any time over a period of a few days, when the groom decided. Everyone had to be ready at a moments notice for the arrival of the groom and then the official wedding could begin. The maidens had to be ready to escort the bridegroom into the wedding ceremony and the feast. This was their job and it could happen at any moment. Hence preparedness was the key. The five wise maidens had extra oil for their lamps. The foolish ones didn’t and as they hadn’t been there to escort the bridegroom in to the ceremony and feast were excluded from all the festivities. I didn’t realise how small these little lamps were until some years ago I saw the personal pottery lamps from excavations in the Middle East. These lamps could fit in your hand and held only a small amount of oil. You would need extra oil supplies to keep them burning indefinitely for several nights. Hence, preparations for the event were important. Half prepared well for the occasion and half didn’t. Half gladly were ready and escorted the bridegroom in and half missed their opportunity to be part of the celebrations.

Reflection and Interpretation of the Parable

1. God's timetable is not necessarily our timetable. Sometimes we would like to have God fitting in with our agendas and wants, but that is not the case. This parable reminds us that God sometimes comes to us when we are least expecting it and when we are least prepared. Sometimes we feel the absence of God and make no effort to try to look for, engage or seek the presence of God. Hence when God comes we do not even recognise the presence of God. Our spiritual oil has all gone and we do not even realise 'God with us'.

2. Initially it seems sad that those with the oil wouldn't share their preparedness with those without the oil. However, all had the same opportunity to be prepared and chances are that if those with enough oil shared with those without oil all may end up 'in the dark' so to speak. Some commentators suggest that this refers to 'keeping our spiritual stocks up' so that we can cope with whatever devastation in life may befall us. In the case of the early Christians (and for some Christians today) it means having spiritual strength to cope with the persecution that would occur within the early church. In other words, having the faith and knowledge to withstand challenges to faith. Those challenges may have changed today but there are still many challenges to our faith. Consumerism, competing interests, various faiths, unanswered prayers and questions to mention but a few things. We've all heard words similar to these: "Well that's it. I gave some of the best years of my life to the church and what has God ever done for me!" Sorry, but it is a faith issue. Where is the prayer, the reflection on Scripture, the serving of others for Christ's sake, the worship and praise of God? This is a tough parable for difficult times. Is their oil still in our lamps? Are we prepared and waiting faithfully expectant in a busy society? We cannot take faith from others but must be reliant on our God given faith for difficult times. Yes, we can be supported by those around us but we also need faith. It is a personal decision.

3. Sticking with the image of oil, the lamp needs to be regularly filled to keep it burning brightly. Jesus here is reminding the 'would be disciples' that they needed regularly to attend to their spiritual well being if they were going to survive and glow brightly into the future together. Not an easy task. Jesus once expressed it this way: "Let your light so shine before all people, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Our faith is not about ourselves, but about God and we are called to bring glory to God. Also we are called to be alert and ready. It's God's timetable not ours!!

Conclusion

Bruce Prewer wrote a wonderful reflection on this passage that I conclude with.

"Lamps without oil make ornaments that often are admired,

But should a neighbour need some light the lamp cannot be fired.

Lamps without oil make fine antiques for dilettantes to hoard -

They make a conversation piece when guests are getting bored.

Lamps without oil polish up well and shine in borrowed light, but when you need to find your way the path stays out of sight.

Lamps without oil are useless things their purpose has been lost, yet Pharisees collect them still and pay an awful cost.

Lamps without oil are fine by day, some bear the best hallmark, but when your power at midnight fails they leave you in the dark.

Lamps filled with oil are lovely things and don't fail expectation, they lead the Bridegroom to the feast and shine with celebration."

Amen