

24th Sunday after Pentecost 2023 Matthew 25:1-13.

Imagine that you are driving by yourself on your way to meeting your future parents-in-law for the very first time, you are meeting your fiancée there. You don't want to be late, and you really want to make a good impression, so you take a short cut over some back roads when, suddenly, your car engine coughs then dies. You've run out of petrol and there is no mobile coverage. You will be an unexplained no-show and it's your own wretched fault.

If we can picture this, we can come a part of the way to feeling like the five foolish bridesmaids. It's not as if it were unexpected that they would need to light the lamps, they were after all carrying them!

Coming toward the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus tells a series of parables about the end times, called the Kingdom Parables, because they are about the very fulfilment of the Kingdom of God when Jesus returns.

In the remaining Sundays leading up to Advent, we will be looking at three of them; the ten bridesmaids, the parable of the talents, and the parable of the sheep and the goats.

These parables will perhaps have one of two effects. We may find them very scary, or we may find them deeply reassuring of the great faithfulness of God.

I confess that often I feel both at the same time! But the fear (I hope and pray) is a healthy and wonder-filled awe that the Lord God Almighty is no tame lion (apologies to CS Lewis).

So the context for all three of these parables is Jesus sitting down and teaching the disciples in private on the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem.

The reason these parables are so central for us is that they were given to the disciples for us, Jesus's church. So the ten bridesmaids are people who profess Jesus Christ and claim to follow him.

On the surface, the ten bridesmaids were united in their expectation that the groom would come, but divided in the way they were waiting for the groom. Five bridesmaids have brought along extra oil required for a night time wedding, and five were not at all prepared should the groom choose to come at night.

The message is of course, be prepared. Most of the Jews were not prepared when Jesus came, but Jesus hopes for better things from his church when he comes again.

The coming of this day is certain, as this parable illustrates with the coming of the bridegroom, who is of course Jesus (Rev. 19:9, 21:2, 9). This is a parable for the Church. The teaching of the wise and foolish bridesmaids builds on the Jesus' previous teaching of the

wise and foolish servants. Both parables illustrate the need to live in a manner that expects the return of the Lord, even when the return is delayed (Matt 24:48; 25:5).

We too, like the bridesmaids, have been chosen to be part of the great marriage banquet in heaven. We too, like the bridesmaids, wait for our bridegroom, the Lord Jesus.

The Bridesmaids in Jewish weddings at the time had to be unmarried, that is virgins, as a sign of unblemished devotion. Through the atoning work of Jesus on the Cross and his resurrection, we too are presented without blemish and dressed in pure white before the bridegroom.

Yet...we've been waiting for him such a long time!

All of us, like the bridesmaids, grow drowsy and can fall asleep. You will notice in the reading that all the bridesmaids fell asleep, both wise and foolish. God knows us all so intimately and fully, that he knows we all fall asleep from time to time – the parable is not about that.

It is about having oil, or not having oil.

The lamps we all carry, are the light we bring into the world as we wait for Jesus to return. Earlier in this gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls us "*the light of the world*" (Matt 5:14). No-one lights a lamp to hide the light that it gives, but holds it up to shed as much light as possible.

Lamps also give out heat. When our lamp is lit and held up in the world, we bring light and warmth into the world, purely by the power of the Holy Spirit and by going out in Jesus' name. But we need oil!

Our oil is our faithful and obedient discipleship. Our oil flasks are best topped up by regular communion, on a daily basis, with the Lord. Renewing our oneness with Jesus every day. Even the shortest time spent alone with God each day keeps God at the centre of our lives and our lamps full of oil – at all times of the day!

The thing about oil, it is our oil only. It is God who provides the oil and the oil he gives us is specific to our model only! He made all of us uniquely and wonderfully just for this reason. Just as the wise bridesmaids couldn't give their oil to the foolish bridesmaids, we can't give our oil to any of our brothers and sisters in the church nor can they give us their oil.

Each lamp burns with its own oil. Yet, marvellously and miraculously, the combined light and warmth of all our lamps brings and reflects Glory back to the bridegroom, Jesus.

In today's second reading, Paul, practical as usual, tells us how to do this. Just keep living our lives together without disputes and craving for material wealth. Paul says, "aspire to live

quietly, to mind your own affairs" (1 Thess 4:11). Mind your own business and do the work that God has blessed you with in life. Whatever it is, farmer, grandparent, welder, builder, teacher, administrator, priest. Behaving and living in love, properly, as the world will be watching how Christians act.

Let them see your light and your warmth. Paul says they will see this by seeing the way the church loves each other. By doing this we will never ever run out of oil and when our Lord comes we will be found doing what we do every other day.

Not hoping the Lord may happen to come when I think I am doing some good work! That's a different sort of oil, that's snake oil!

Many of us may find ourselves secretly sympathetic to the foolish maidens, we think they are merely forgetful.

No, they had no oil.

So it's a very serious question, do we the Church really live as though the bridegroom's arrival is certain? Jesus himself says in just the last chapter in Matthew "I will come when you least expect it!" (my paraphrase 24:44).

As Jesus' people, to live in vigilance means to do the tasks that we have been appointed to do in preparation for our master's coming with great joy. Seeking first the Kingdom of God and the righteousness with God that come from our relationship with and through Christ Jesus.

Finally we can't talk about this parable (or the next two) without saying that there will come a time when it is too late. One won't be able to get anymore oil and the door will be closed.

This is a great truth in an age where many seem to believe in universal salvation. The gospel is clear, as our own spirits confirm, that we are saved by grace alone through the faith in and of Jesus.

We aren't complacent or superior, we want everyone to know the great love of God in Jesus. This life is a mere forerunner of our true lives yet to come. CS Lewis calls it the preface of the true and eternal story that won't even begin until our Lord returns. Come dear Lord!

Let me pray...