

## What's in those lamps?

Joshua 24:1–3a, 14–25

Psalm 78:1–7

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

Matthew 25:1–13

### **Text: Matthew 25:1-4**

‘Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps.

### **Introduction**

Anticipation of the arrival of special guests is thrilling, akin to when I was a boy anticipating the arrival of my cousins to our home so play could begin. Such anticipation is thrilling—for a while. The excitement about what is just around the corner heightens the sense of coming fulfilment. Everyone feels supercharged. This lasts for an hour, two hours in a stretch, but if there is an unexpected delay...then the waiting becomes tedious. In this parable of the ten bridesmaids, Jesus underlines the importance for preparedness in the face of an unexpectedly long delay.

1. In just two weeks the long church season of “ordinary time” or the time “after Pentecost” will draw to a close and a new year will begin—the season of Advent marks the new year. The colours of antependia will change, for us, from green to purple. Advent is that season when we focus on the truth that we are waiting for our Lord’s return even as we prepare to celebrate his first coming in the festival of Christmas. As Karl Barth wrote many times, the church has no other time in this world but that of Advent—“the time between” as he often called it. A verse in 2 Peter describes this time as “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God.” (2 Peter 3:12)

Advent is the dialectic between the waiting and the hastening, the faithful confidence that strains forward toward the day and the long endurance that’s required to wait for it. There is no other time given us in this life than this time, the time between the first coming of our Lord in humility and his second coming in glory. This is a strong theme in the Gospel of Matthew. This waiting is the subject of our Lord’s parable of the ten bridesmaids plus other parables he told.

In Matthew’s story of Jesus, Jesus has just now withdrawn from the city of Jerusalem with his disciples to the Mount of Olives. Jesus’ public teaching ministry is at an end. It is most likely towards evening of the Tuesday of what we call Holy Week. On Friday Jesus will be back in Jerusalem—this time to be crucified. The conversation has been about the coming destruction of the Jerusalem temple and of the time of the coming of the Son of Man in glory. Following this are the parables of the thief in the night, the faithful and unfaithful servants, the ten bridesmaids, the money in trust (the “talents”), and finally the Last judgement.

In the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church he writes as follows: “I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” (2 Corinthians 11:2) If

you are reading the parable of these ten bridesmaids in the NRSV that has footnotes, you will notice that the word ‘bridesmaids’ has a footnote which tells you that this is the Greek word ‘virgins.’ Virtually all interpreters agree that the ten bridesmaids represent the church—the community of professing Christians. That’s why the bride doesn’t appear in the story. In this parable, the bridesmaids are the virgin church, and the bridegroom, Jesus Christ, is arriving to sweep them up into his triumphal procession. But there has been a delay in his arrival.

As we have noted in other places, the image of a wedding festival is a primary image—perhaps the primary image—of the Kingdom of heaven (as Matthew calls it). Whatever the marriage customs may have been in first-century Judea, it is clear that the most important characteristic of the celebration is its untrammled joyousness. In the story, the arrival of the bridegroom is intended to signal the beginning of the feast. Until he comes, it’s all anticipation; and as we noted already, anticipation is thrilling for a while; a delay certainly dampens fever pitch. The church ever finds itself in this place. Jesus commends the preparedness for delay demonstrated by the five who brought with them the flasks of oil.

2. Jesus states the point he is making with this parable; “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” “Keeping awake” looks like the five bridesmaids having their lamps burning and their oil in store. They are ready to take their place in the wedding march.

You notice that all ten bridesmaids became drowsy and slept. No blame is hinted at; Jesus makes no negative comment about the sleep. His admonition to ‘keep awake’ to his coming is clearly not a call to prop our eyelids open and never take sleep. Jesus is well aware of our frailties and graciously makes allowance for them. There is no call in the gospel to go assemble in white robes on the Mount of Olives singing songs of deliverance till he returns; if we did we would quickly discover our need to find a hotel and check in for some rest. The Apostle Paul does say that, as the church gathers routinely for the Lord’s supper, “as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he, comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:26) Here we have a hint of how the early church understood what was in those lamps.

So what’s in those lamps? One of the principles of rightly interpreting scripture is that scripture interprets scripture. In the older testament, oil symbolizes the divine influence as God makes incursion into people’s lives. The priests were set apart for their ministry with the holy oil; when David was anointed with oil to be King by Samuel, we are told the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. (1 Samuel 16:13). The prophet Zechariah was given a vision of a golden lampstand with seven lamps and it was fed with oil from two olive trees—its meaning? “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord. (Zechariah 4:6) The word ‘Messiah’ means ‘anointed’. Recall Jesus in his hometown synagogue announcing his ministry with a text from Isaiah; “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”

The incursion that Jesus makes into our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit to call us to faith in him and to undergird us in faith is, I believe, the oil. That is what is in the lamp. Matthew helps us here because in another place earlier in his gospel Jesus uses this metaphor of a lamp. “You are the light of the world. ... No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before

others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” It is akin to what the Apostle Paul declares of the believer, “you are a new creature in Christ, now be one.” Or as Jesus said, keep that lamp burning. This is what preparedness looks like.

In a interesting [sermon](#) on this text, Rev. Fleming Rutledge (I borrowed her sermon title) she asks, “What does it mean for us, all these weary and discouraging hours, and days, and years that he (Jesus) does not come and it appears that he never will, and the church grows slack?” She goes on to say that, “Perpetual alertness is not what’s wanted; what’s wanted is that stored-up emergency supply to last while “according to his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.” (2 Peter 3:13) It is through our regular worship, Bible study, and prayer, that we don’t need to run out to the store in the middle of the night to buy more oil. The church has been in the middle of the night for a long time.

In some respects, believers have already experienced the blessing of the flasks of oil. Over the years of worship and bible study a supply has been built up and then some trouble comes, and you find yourself drawing on those reserves as faith is sustained in the moment—the lamp keeps burning. What we embraced and nurtured long ago sustains us in the hour of need.

Some have read this parable and criticized those with the oil for not sharing. This is to read into the customs of the day things we know nothing about. Some details in the story are simply the customs of the day and we must be careful not to read into them things that Jesus does not emphasize. Jesus’ point is about ‘keeping awake’ to his coming in the face of a delay.

As we have noted, we are not able to stay on high alert endlessly. Our Lord understands our humanity evidenced in the point that all the bridesmaids dosed off during the delay. One of the reasons I find the rhythm of following the scripture readings appointed by the Lectionary for Sunday worship helpful, is because we come routinely to this scriptural theme. As we say in the Apostles’ Creed of Jesus, ‘and he will come to judge the living and the dead.’ The church has been waiting, what seems to us, a long time. We may even feel embarrassed of our faith that so central a claim has not occurred. Keep in mind that God’s relationship to time is not ours and that all we need to endure he supplies. But there is a tendency to slack off because of the delay and these scriptural reminders call us to renewal, recommitment to keep the lamp burning.

It is hard to predict the impact of the pandemic on the church. With the advent of congregations moving to online services, will people return to in-person worship or stay home and watch? The longer we stay away from going to church the more settled the habit becomes of not going. Don’t misunderstand. I am in favour of livestreaming our services; for church family members when frailties prevent them from coming, it is a great blessing to stay connected through seeing the worship with which one is familiar. So too for those travelling. When I am on vacation I was blessed to tune into the livestream of our service.

Some of you know that I have a very dear minister friend who pastors a church in Northern Ireland. (I have preached in that church and he has preached here.) Some Sundays I get up early and join the livestream of the service so I can hear him preach. It is a delight to be able to do that, yet I find that each time when the service is over, that I long to go and buy an airline ticket so I can be there in person. Online is not the same as being in the house. There are things we

must do together as Christians and corporate worship is one of them. I say this so that when pandemic concerns are behind us, we will renew our commitment to be together. It is oil in the lamp.

3. It was now the twilight of Joshua's life and career as leader of Israel; that is where we entered the story in our Older Testament reading today. Joshua was the leader who succeeded Moses as leader of Israel who led them through those years as they took possession of the land God had promised to Abraham's descendants. Joshua has called the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel to an assembly before God where he called them to renew their covenant to be God's people. It was a covenant Moses called them to commit to before entering the promised land. (Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

As I reread that story, perhaps you noted it too, that after the people had committed themselves to Joshua's commitment—as for me and my house we will serve the Lord—Joshua said, 'Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.' After all that these people had seen God do for them, after all they had known of God's acts to rescue their parents and grandparents from slavery in Egypt, they are still hedging their bets about serving God or the foreign gods that surrounded them.

We may not have idols in our homes yet there is a warning here that our hearts tend to drift from our commitment to follow Jesus. Things that each have their proper place—wealth, leisure, career achievements, family—can be things that are nudging to be first in our lives, that push to become of ultimate importance. Believers need moments of renewal and recommitment; I need those moments of clarity when the busyness and responsibilities of life clouds the vision, moments of clarity like Joshua—as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

4. Today we mark Remembrance Day and to honour those we remember it is important to treasure now the freedom we enjoy that they sacrificed to preserve. Freedom is a wonderful treasure, but there is a higher calling for us as believers. Many may wonder how loyalty to God promotes freedom. The understanding of a people and its government that they all answer to One greater than themselves is the ground for true freedom. You serve your country and your neighbours best when you serve God first.

May Joshua's commitment be ours; 'we will serve the Lord.'