

Matthew 25; 1-14

15.11.23

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Today's parable concerning the ten young women stresses the need for wisdom and vigilance. It is not clear where the story is set. We know that it is later in the day, perhaps evening or night. We know that the ten young women are waiting to meet the bridegroom who has been unexpectedly delayed. While waiting, they have, all ten become drowsy and fallen asleep and have been awoken at midnight by an unknown voice announcing the arrival of the bridegroom. In contrast to the parable of the wicked slave which directly precedes this story, the young women described as foolish have not engaged in sinful activities forbidden by the ten commandments. Rather their crime, or reason for their foolishness is simply to do with the fact that they had not prepared for the potential that the bridegroom might be late. The wise women presumably had used some foresight to anticipate this possibility, and so had enough oil to keep their lamps lit. The foolish women had not anticipated this and so, as a consequence, were forced to separate themselves from the group in order to go and find more oil for their lamps.

We are not told where they found oil at such a late hour, it is perhaps likely that the whole village was still awake for the wedding procession so someone was able to provide what they needed. Having procured the oil the women returned to find that the bridegroom had come and gone. Once the women made their way to the place where the banquet was happening, they found that they were too late; the door is shut and their plea to rejoin the party is rejected. The petition made to the householder hosting the banquet by the women, 'Lord, Lord', has echoes of the words of Jesus from earlier in the gospel; in Matthew chapter seven where Jesus warns that those who call out 'Lord, Lord'

without doing the will of God will not enter the kingdom of heaven, the same kingdom that we are told in this parable that is represented as the wedding banquet. Here the foolish women appear to have somehow not done the will of God, not so much by falling asleep, as the wise women also slept, but because they were not there when the Bridegroom arrived.

There is a line of thought in New Testament theology that many of the early Christians had expected that the second coming of Christ would happen in their lifetime. Writing some 52 years after the death and resurrection of Christ, the community that St Matthew was writing to could be forgiven for wondering why Christ had not returned. In this case, the message of this parable might be, as St Mathew presents it, a message to the Church community to which he wrote encouraging or warning Christians not to allow their commitment a decline, to hold true to their faith, to not allow their love to grow cold and to endure to the end. To be there and not to disappear into the night.

The power of Jesus' words themselves in the gospel parable are stark; the foolish are shut out with seemingly no way back. The door is shut. If I am honest, I think I would probably find myself more likely to be in the camp of the foolish women than the wise. Many family walks in the Cheviots have come about with the promise of me cooking a hot lunch on the side of a fell, usually pasta and bolognese or some such culinary delight. Except, inevitably, I forget to pack a vital component to make this delight happen; the box of matches left at home or that I forgotten to pack one gas to fuel the stove, a pan to cook the pasta in or water to boil it with. Miles from the car, with only a bag of dried pasta and couple of bags of crisps, my popularity plunges very quickly and hunger ascends. I can well imagine the anxiety of the foolish maidens; waking up suddenly to find their lamps burning low, the panic of their rushing around, knocking from door to door, anxious and trying to find some oil, their

disappointment, grief even at missing the bridegroom and been shut out of the banquet, tired and hungry.

The image of the unpreparedness of the foolish women and their subsequent rush and agitation to find oil is perhaps an image that holds a mirror up to each of us. Much of human life is lived out reactively; We can spend an awful lot of time chewing over the past, worrying about the future or suddenly reacting in the present as we are taken by surprise by something unexpected or which requires bustle and busyness. Like the foolish women, we are too busy running about doing this or that trying to make up for our lack of attention, that we miss the arrival of what we have longed for.

Karl Barth once pointed out that nowhere in the gospels are we told that the disciples sought or found or even expected the resurrection and the appearance of the risen Christ. Rather Christ appeared to the disciples unexpectedly, often when they were least expecting it. In the resurrection appearances, the initiative to appear was always with Jesus; he drew near, he came, as if it were, from nowhere.

In this time of remembrance, it is natural to worry about the future because after over 100 years of remembering the carnage of human war, we humans seem to have learnt nothing. War, violence between peoples, they do not seem to go away. They go on and on and on, action breeds reaction leads to more bloodshed, suffering and pain. It can feel that night is all about us.

It can feel like the oil is running out; the light of wisdom derived from remembering is dimming as we make the same mistakes over and over again. Stay the course says St Mathew, be prepared says Jesus; do not retreat from the presence of the moment through agitation, busyness or worry. Rather, in prayer, contemplation and community, keep your lamp lit, oil topped up and wicks trimmed; as we like those women sleep beneath the

lengthening shadow and awake into the darkness of midnight, the darkness of doubt that is human history; then so do we hold that small light in our hands as we bring ourselves and the tragedies of human history before an absent and present God.

The spiritual task is to stay with it; to stay with the doubt and uncertainty of this present moment; to stay with the community of faith; to stay with the fragility, failure and suffering of humankind as we wait for a time that we do not know, a time that we cannot anticipate, a time that we have no power to make happen. All we can do is be prepared and to stay with this history as it unfolds.