

“Light At The End Of The Tunnel” – Mat 25:1-13

You may recall that last week I was slightly grumpy about the way that politicians and the media continue to fuel a downward spiral in our society, drawing upon our natural tendency to see the worst instead of the best in situations. Examples abound of how people tend to focus on doom and gloom, glossing over any messages of promise and hope. This is true even for old and well-known writings. Take for instance the parable we just read from Matthew’s gospel. Only two of the thirteen verses are complimentary to any of the participants. I suspect most of us when we are asked if we remember this story remember most clearly the five who had the door slammed in their faces. Good grief! No wonder people outside the church think of Christians as being somewhat negative, even grumpy. And the sad part is that buried in this parable is a positive, uplifting story of a promise made good and a bright future revealed!

For all that this parable has such a painful ending (one of Matthew’s favourite kinds!) the story starts innocently enough, with much anticipation of joy and excitement – who knew it would turn into an episode of “Rich Bride, Poor Bride”?! We can easily picture the ten young ladies, all dressed up in their bridesmaid dresses, clustered together and giggling excitedly. Nervous and filled with eager anticipation, they gather their lamps and head out to meet “Mr. Right”, the groom. You can smell the flowers in the evening air, and see the light from their oil lamps bathing the stone walls with splashes of warm orange..

Now we’re not told whether it was a bachelor party or a breakdown of the limo or one of those interminable photo sessions that caused the groom to be so late, but late he was. Here’s where we might start to raise an eyebrow, because it’s usually the bride who is late. Perhaps even stranger, however, the bride isn’t even mentioned here – only the ten bridesmaids. In any event, it’s the groom who’s late. So late that the initial excitement has worn off, all the bridesmaids are dozing in the courtyard, and their lamps are flickering low. Finally at midnight, “Here he comes!”, cries an anonymous voice. Someone was still awake, but we’re left to speculate who that might be. Part of the groom’s party, perhaps? A watchman on the wall? The kitchen staff trying to keep the rubber chicken warm? We can only guess. But the effect of that voice was clear enough. With a sudden rush, the bridesmaids burst into a flurry of activity. “Oh, just look at me, I’m a mess! I’m all rumpled like an old rag! Quick, give me a hand!” Adjustments to dresses, final touches to hair and makeup, and finally a last-minute trim of the wick to give the best light. But wait, the lamps are almost empty! “Who’s got some oil?!”

As it turns out, half of them have brought extra oil, and they’re in good shape. But in what is perhaps the most curious detail in the whole story, the ones who had the foresight to bring extra oil tell the others to slip down to the dealers and buy some for themselves. Curious? Yes, for several reasons. First of all, I ask you, what dealers are still open at midnight? This was not, after all, the age of the Esso “On The Run” convenience store, or the Seven-Eleven. Besides, have you ever had to buy batteries at midnight from a convenience store? More often than not they have some almost stale-dated and grossly over-priced batteries, but never the size you need!

However, even more curious – especially from a Christian perspective – is the question of why those who had extra oil failed to share theirs with the ones who were less well prepared. After all, how much oil did everybody need? It was exceedingly late, after midnight by now, and I don’t think the groom and the bridesmaids were going to party all night! So, why the reluctance on the part of the five who were described as wise to share with those who didn’t have the foresight to plan ahead? Is the moral or religious lesson intended to be illustrated in this short simple parable that ‘sharing is bad’? Or worse yet, “greed is good”? I don’t think so, or at least I hope not!

So how can we resolve the disturbing confusion raised by that curious detail? I think the only way we can resolve it is not to probe too deeply into the meaning of it but instead merely accept it as a dramatic device in the story, the specific detail that causes half of the bridesmaids to be busy at something other than what they were supposed to be doing, and thus miss the window (or door, as the case may be!) of opportunity.

And do they ever miss that opportunity! By the time they get back from the corner lamp-oil store, the door is shut and firmly bolted, and they are left if not in the dark then certainly out in the cold! Milling around in the street in angst and distress, pounding on the door and pleading to be let in, but the answer is as tough as the door itself: “Get lost! I don’t know you!” If we thought that message of not sharing was a bit harsh and non-Christian, here is a message that is even tougher to deal with, the message that there is a final, definite, no-exceptions cutoff point to the entry into the kingdom. Ah Yes, the kingdom ... remember, that’s how this all started, as a story with the introduction, “the kingdom of heaven will be like this”. This is a story about missing the boat, or at least the door, into the kingdom.

We don’t like that, do we? We like to think that there’s always some “wiggle room”, just the teensiest bit of way that the door can be slipped open just one more time. More and more people it seems simply can’t handle the concept of “it’s over” – and if you think I’m exaggerating, just stand at any corner and watch both drivers and pedestrians have trouble with a yellow, or for that matter a red, light that says, “it’s over!” It’s tough to accept that the time is over, that the ferry has left the dock, that the opportunity has past, that the door is firmly closed and locked forever. The more important the appointment behind the door, the harder it is to accept that your opportunity has been lost for all time.

So, this parable, uncomfortable as it is, sends us a powerful two-fold message: there is a cutoff point the exact time of which we cannot know; and we must be ready. The parable even concludes with an explicit command to “keep awake”, although even that’s a bit confusing, since even the bridesmaids fell asleep. But we’ll take that as Matthew’s summary of what the parable means. “Keep awake.” “Be prepared.” “Check your oil.”

Maybe we can also note here that this is not really a new concept. For example, in our Old Testament reading the prophet Amos declared that “the day of the Lord” would not be quite the pleasant festival that people like to anticipate and celebrate in advance. He also declared that the appropriate preparation for that momentous event was not so much bright lights and festivals and solemn assemblies, nor burnt offerings and songs and melodious sounds of the harps.

So, is there anything happy or positive about this parable? Yes, there is, although we miss it because we tend to just nod, and say “unh-huh” and move right on into the negative part. That positive part? The bridesmaids who were ready got into the wedding banquet. “Oh yeah, sure ...”, you nod ... but let me say it again ... the bridesmaids who were ready did get into the wedding banquet. This is a message of promise, that the waiting can turn out OK, that the promise of being at the banquet can be – will be – fulfilled. It’s an affirmation that the bridegroom, Christ, will arrive eventually. Yes, I know there’s that uncomfortable bit, but I’m “preaching to the choir” so to speak. The message to those of us who believe in the redeeming power of Christ to ensure that we have a place at the great heavenly feast is a positive one of reassurance and promises made good for those who wait faithfully.

Aha! There of course is the real issue, the real essence of this parable describing in the narrowest of terms what the kingdom of heaven will be like. By the grace of God real life is much richer than the narrow confines of this parable. We of course know that since the invention of flashlights we no longer have to make sure that we have enough oil on hand, but

you get the picture. This is about much, much more than just oil or lamps or even bridesmaids – this is about how we are to live our lives in anticipation of the day that we will meet Christ face-to-face, whether in this life or the next.

First we are reminded by this parable to recall all the blessings in life that we enjoy. We have lamps, and oil, and clothes, and most of all the love of the bridegroom. And then we are called to move forward, as we have choices to make, decisions about how we will live and what we will do to make sure we're ready for that glorious moment. The grace and joy of that insight gives us purpose, and meaning, and a sense of direction, doesn't it? From this simple parable we now have the insight and the foresight to choose actions that will help us to be ready. Those actions that we can choose are as rich and varied as life itself although there are some common themes. Being prepared urges us to live out Christ's call and command to love God with all you are and to love your neighbour as you are loved and there are some concrete ways to accomplish this.

Love God; in worship and praise. Give thanks for life; for the beauty of this earth; for the love of family, friends and neighbours; for the love of God in Christ Jesus who redeems us and makes us right with God; for the simple joys and the complex joys; for the strength to make it through the times that seem not so joyful.

Love your neighbour, in acts of kindness and mercy that show God's love shining in you like a well-trimmed lamp. Love and live justice, letting it "roll down like waters" - feed the hungry; clothe the naked; comfort the lonely; heal the sick; reach out and let all people know they are loved.

Oh yes, it is so easy to jump to the negative especially in parables like this, but so much more useful and fulfilling to hear instead the positive message. Even if you're still concerned about the fate of the five bridesmaids who were not ready, hear another positive message buried in here. Through God's love in you, you now have both the insight and the opportunity to share your oil with someone else, to help them be as ready as you are. You do not have to fatalistically shrug your shoulders and dismiss the other five and crowd in to the banquet hall – you are blessed with the chance to help them enter the door as well.

The real message from this parable? Keep awake in your faith, remember how God has blessed you, and then move forward towards that joyous day when together we are ushered into the great heavenly feast, to celebrate and to worship God in the presence of Christ and all the saints.