

6 November 2011

Reflecting on God's Word

Reading: Matthew 25: 1-13 (NT page 994)

Reader: John Nichol

Background to the reading

Our reading is in many ways a painting depicting the marriage customs of Jesus' day.

On the occasion of a marriage, the bridegroom, attended by his friends, went to the house of his bride, and brought her with her friends in joyful procession to his own house.

In general the marriage was celebrated by a feast in the house of the bride's parents, to which all friends were invited; and, on the day of the marriage, the bride, concealed under a thick veil, was conducted to her future husband's home.

At all formal banquets, the invited guests presented their tablets or cards to a servant stationed at the entrance, whose job it was to keep out the uninvited. When the company was assembled, the “master of the house” shut the door, and thereafter the servant was instructed not to allow anyone to enter, no matter how insistent they were.

Our reading is about 10 girls who went to a wedding feast. 5 of them were wise, they took extra oil for their lamps with them – in other words, they prepared themselves for the unexpected. The other 5 were foolish – they have been to weddings before and they knew that you hardly ever waited very long for the groom to arrive – I mean, have you ever heard of a GROOM being late for his wedding? That’s what brides are for!! So they didn’t even consider the possibility that their lamps might run out of oil.

Now, in Biblical times weddings were conducted differently from today. The groom and his friends – all

cheery, singing and dancing, went to the bride's parents' home. There they picked up the bride and her friends and together they travelled to the groom's house for the rest of the festivities – which could sometimes last for up to 2 weeks. This symbolically indicated that the bride was now a member of the groom's family. Although there was no specific time for the groom and his friends to arrive at the bride's parents' house, he usually came in the early evening.

But in *this* case the groom didn't show up in the early evening. But the groom probably just got held up by something, and at midnight he made his appearance. And it was only then that the 5 foolish girls realized that they didn't have oil in their lamps anymore. Lamps of the Old Testament period were made exclusively of pottery and were an open-bowl design with a pinched spout to support the wick. Wicks were made generally of twisted flax. Though the lamps almost exclusively burned olive oil, in later times oil from nuts, fish, and other sources were used.

If we keep in mind that they didn't have any electricity for street lights or batteries for torches, it is understandable that you couldn't undertake a journey in the middle of the night without a lamp – and 1 lamp would not be sufficient for 2 people, because it only made a very small flame.

To make a long story short, when the 5 foolish girls returned from the shops with enough oil for their lamps, the wedding feast already started, and in those days it was custom to lock the doors once the bride and groom was there – so these poor girls couldn't participate in the festivities.

Matthew's message is clear and simple: prepare yourself for the unexpected because you do not know what will happen with you next! Your life is not in your hands!

MP 167 Give me oil in my lamp

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon is verse 13 “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

In many respects our Gospel reading this morning focuses on the unexpected, something that was unthinkable in Biblical times for the bridesmaids not to have an extra flask full of oil and a bridegroom to come at such a late hour.

But we live in different times and in many respects we have to find another metaphor or life situation to grasp the point Matthew is trying to make.

I think a good situation to link in what happened to the foolish girls is to miss a bus - especially when you miss it by seconds...you just took one second too long to do this or that. Then you know you are stuck. You either have to wait another 10 minutes or even longer when you travel from East Calder to Edinburgh!

Another situation is when you arrive at a very important football match and realize you did nae bring your entrance ticket!

Matthew was trying to tell his congregation living in the first century that they must be prepared because life belongs to God. He controls everything even the unexpected to happen.

I wonder how many people who died in the horrible accident over the weekend expected that to happen to them. I am sure no-one knew. And I just wonder: were they prepared to enter into the Kingdom of God?

We cannot prepare ourselves for things like these. And the only way in which we will be able to handle it, is if we have enough oil in our lamps.

But how do we get oil in our lamps? By living in relation with God. The oil we need is the presence of God manifested and experienced when we are obedient to God's call to love our neighbour, to follow the teachings of Jesus, to trust in the promise of his presence in our lives. Being ready - preparedness - happens when day-by-day, week-by-week, we hear God's Word and we are

receptive to God's presence. Our oil is renewed when we are actually doing what God tells us to do.

In other words, as we follow Jesus in our daily lives, we are storing up on oil. It is in doing justice, loving mercifully and walking humbly with God that we discover and renew the oil in our lamps.

Ultimately, if we live like this, we will have nothing to fear when our own lives come to an end. Therefore, we must never ever postpone anything we want to or ought to do. Don't think that you can start making a difference when you have more time available, don't think that you can start helping people when you have less problems of your own – because frankly, then you are never going to do it.

Treat every day as your last day- every opportunity to show the love of God as your last and only opportunity, every conversation as your last conversation to tell others about Jesus Christ and his kingdom, every act of

forgiveness to show that God forgave all our sins, as your last and only chance.

The best time to put oil in your lamp is now – because then you can rest assured that whenever it unexpectedly gets dark in your live, you will still have a light to live by – namely the presence of God's Spirit in your life.

Amen