

SERMON: 8 November 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Amos 5:18-24

Matthew 25:1-13

Wake up! Come out to meet him.

“Saints are those who wake up while in this world, instead of waiting for the next one”.

(Richard Rohr, *For the Good of the World*, 6/11/20)

The context - Jerusalem. Jesus urging disciples to look beyond the bricks and mortar of the Temple to envisage the heavenly kingdom coming.

A heavenly kingdom that would fulfil what the prophets like Amos had been calling for for centuries.

Justice rolling like a river and righteousness like a never ending stream.
(Amos 5:24).

In the parable of the ten maidens there are 5 who are wise and 5 who are foolish.

Is this what the parable is about? Being prepared? Staying alert? Keeping watch?

5 seem prepared and 5 are unprepared and when the bridegroom comes the prepared ones send the unprepared away to buy their own oil for their lamps.

I'm a bit uncomfortable with that.

Not to mention that the groom then favours the 5 who are prepared and shuts the door on the unprepared.

We think parables were often used to teach one lesson.

And the lesson most commonly assumed here is that one needs to be prepared, stay alert and keep watch, for the coming of bride groom.

“Keep watch for you do not know the day or the hour” is how Jesus ends the parable.

And, on one level this IS what the parable teaches - how important it is to keep on keeping on, to stick at it, to keep watching for and seeking the kingdom of heaven and the Living One who is behind it all.

However, on another level, the Greek word for keep watch can perhaps more accurately be translated as to wake up.

“Wake up! Come out to meet him!” In verse 6 is the central verse of the parable, and for me, is the verse that speaks loudest.

Because that phrase speaks of the invitation to all to come and be a part of who Christ is and what Christ is doing.

But I’m still not comfortable with other ideas in the parable.

Why don’t the wise one, with extra oil, share their light with those who don’t have enough? What would have happened if they’d been more concerned about the emptiness of their neighbour’s flask than the brimming fullness of their own?

And why does the groom criticise the so called foolishly unprepared ones who arrive late, especially since he himself was late for his own wedding feast?

Why are 5 women left out in the cold in the middle of the night - the door is closed, the chance is gone, the opportunity missed - all things that happen in life.

It doesn’t resonate with the God I want to trust and the God I think I know.

But maybe we have to gloss over these questions and resign ourselves to the fact that the parable is not meant to teach these other things.

But I wonder if there might be more to this than what first meets the eye.

In Hebrew culture, rabbis used to have a saying that finding meaning in the Torah was a case of holding a multifaceted gemstone which you kept turning and viewing from different angles in order to see a different facet reflecting a new light.

I wonder if we can keep turning the gem to find new meaning in this parable.

And thinking with verse 6 - wake up, come out to meet him - as the pivotal verse in the parable, I ask this question to myself and all of us who at times feel quite unprepared. Who at times never have any extra oil in the tank.

Why did the foolish ones think their oil supply was more important than they themselves?

Why didn't they just go and meet him anyway?

And therefore,

Why don't we just go as we are, and meet him?

Why do we feel as if we have to rely on others to borrow their oil?

Why can we not just go with our lamps empty?

Because here's the rub - the Groom delights in you, NOT in your lamp!

And so it doesn't matter if your lamp is empty.

Just come.

Come as you are.

For the Groom delights in you as you are.

Oh yes there will be others wiser than us who appear better prepared.

But we're not called to compare ourselves to them.

The Groom calls us, even in our unpreparedness.

Don't let your fear or inadequacy keep you away from the party!

Be willing to show up as you are.

Debie Thomas wrote a commentary on that when she wrote this.

"I totally *get* the "foolish" bridesmaids in this narrative moment. I get how hard it is to stick around when my "light" is fading and my reserves are low. I get what it's like to scramble for perfection, to insist on having my ducks in a row before I show up in front of God, or the church, or the world. After all, it's scary and vulnerable-making to linger in the dark when my pitiful little lamp is flickering, my once-robust faith is evaporating, and my measly, leaky flask is filled with nothing but doubt and pain and grief and weariness. Only a bridesmaid who trusts in the groom's deep and unconditional compassion, only a bridesmaid who knows that the groom has light and oil to spare, only a bridesmaid who understands that her presence — messy and imperfect though it might be — is of intrinsic value to the groom, will find the honesty and the courage to stay."

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2503>

Even if your light feels like a smouldering wick or a barely flickering ember.
The Groom has plenty of Light and the wedding hall is full of holy light.

The parable ends with the wedding party/banquet taking place reminding us of the certainty of the celebration in the future.

The wedding feast of the Bride and Groom WILL take place (and the Bride will be pure and spotless and radiant THEN).

In the meantime the invitations are out and responses are awaited.

Do we want to extend the invitation and share our oil with our neighbour or do we want to respond ourselves and come as we are?