



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church November 9, 2014

Matthew 25: 1-13

It's generally recognised that Jesus was a great teacher. He spoke directly to people in a language that they could understand and used images from their life as examples and spiritual lessons. Many of his images still speak to us today, although our modern urban lifestyle is less receptive to the rural, farming images, however some of the parables remain a mystery. One of those is today's parable of the bridesmaids. It's not just the strange practices of 1st C Middle East weddings. This is a parable of judgement when we are set to hear the comforting words of God's love and it's all wrapped up in teaching about the end times, which for most of us is itself a whole area of mystery – so much so that the whole of chapter 24 with Jesus teaching about the end times is left out of the Lectionary. Remembering that election image I used a few weeks ago, there will be a lot of preachers looking to the Joshua text today to avoid end times and mystery.

While we may like to avoid this parable and its intention; Jesus is telling the disciples and the people that after he is gone, times are going to get tough while they wait and work for the kingdom. Matthew's readers were probably in the midst of some of those tough times. The hope of Jesus return to bring in the real, physical kingdom of God on earth was a great comfort to those in persecution. This was a message about the importance of holding on, and indeed prospering, through times of troubles and assaults until the Lord comes again. Many scholars and teachers these days see a relevant meaning in these passages by not confining the meaning to the end times. More than being prepared for the Second Coming of Jesus; it's about people and churches having the resources to keep working through the troubling times of waiting for the kingdom to become real amongst them.

There is no equivalent to this image of a wedding in our culture. On the day of the wedding, the bridegroom would arrive at the bride's house and escort her to the ceremony and celebration, but there was no set time for the celebration, and usually the bridegroom would try to arrive at an unexpected time, mostly delayed enough for the celebration to be at night – hence the need for the lamps. With that background we can get the basic message of the parable. Keep your lamp ready to welcome the one who is coming at an unknown time. This parable is usually interpreted as being prepared; the wise bridesmaids were prepared with enough oil to keep their lamps lit during the

wedding procession and celebration. I think, however, this is more a case of having the resources to hold on; the 'foolish bridesmaids' didn't have enough oil to keep their lamps lit. If this parable was about being prepared, the inference is that we can sit and nothing until Jesus comes and then do what is required to join the celebrations. I think Jesus was more interested in telling people to keep working until he comes i.e. keep the lamps trimmed and lit and burning in anticipation of his return. Rather than simply being prepared to light the lamp when you see him coming, it's about having the resources of oil to keep your lamp burning. So the basic question that arises from this parable is 'What keeps your lamp lit?' Remember the old song, "Give me oil in my lamp?" *Sing*

We may not be in a time of persecution like the early church, or indeed like churches in some parts of the world now, but we are in testing times of a disinterest, secular insults and an ageing, shrinking church. In some respects this is more testing than persecution; strong persecution can spark strong faith. We are in a time when lamps can go out because people can't see the point and so lose faith. So, I ask again, 'What keeps your lamp lit?'

Could it be:

- prayer and study
- fellowship
- exercising gifts and abilities
- reflection and meditation
- discussion and argument

(Turn to your neighbour and discuss – 3 – 4 mins.)

Whether we are talking about the coming end times - when the kingdom and the church will be assaulted by calamities in the world, with rejection and condemnation, false teachers and false prophets – or the tough times of problems that we all go through as we wait for God to come into our life, we need the resources to keep going. It requires something more than being told to have hope and to remain in the faith. It requires something from outside of yourself. The parable talks about oil in your lamp; a modern analogy would be charge in your battery. Whichever image you prefer, the basic point remains. Seek, find, and hold onto what it is that you need to remain in the faith, hope and love of the One true God in Jesus the Christ so that when the kingdom becomes real we can take our place in it.