

**Oil in my lamp**  
**12 November 2017**  
**Revd Jenny Wilkens**

*Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25*  
*1 Thessalonians 4:13-18*  
*Matthew 25:1-13*

[http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons\\_pid\\_22.html](http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html)



Yesterday I read a news item<sup>1</sup> about a man in Wellington who works for the Red Cross in disaster response and logistics. He came through the Kaikoura quake last November, his apartment strewn with furniture and possessions in a way very familiar to you folk here. He decided he was lacking emergency supplies himself though and went off to Bunnings to get some torches, batteries etc. As he walked back to his apartment carrying his emergency supplies, he saw a fire engine outside his apartment, and was told the cinemas next door were about to fall on his apartment building and he had ten minutes, in which in a confused state, he got his laptop, toothbrush and toothpaste and not much else. Even those who we might think would be best able to cope in a disaster may not always be the best prepared!

Preparedness and making the right choices are the themes of our readings today. We are rapidly approaching the end of the liturgical year and our excursus through Matthew's Gospel. In Matthew's scheme of things, we have come to the end of Jesus' public ministry, and before his passion, he is giving what in Biblical terms is called a farewell discourse to his disciples. But it is couched in themes of eschatology – in the face of the last things, where do disciples find hope? – and in apocalyptic language and imagery, which uses symbols and larger than life images to reveal God's presence within human history, however dark it may seem. So Jesus in Matthew 24 and 25 speaks of the destruction of the Temple, signs of the end, persecutions, the rise of false Messiahs and false prophets, and then the coming of the Son of Man. As so often, he speaks in Parables, including today's well-known parable of the ten bridesmaids.

Last time I was in Bethlehem, we came out of the Church of the Nativity late in the afternoon and walked full tilt into a full-on Palestinian wedding procession on the way to the church, complete with brass band and bagpipes, beautifully dressed young women dancing, children everywhere, I felt like I could have been in the middle of that parable!

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<sup>1</sup> [www.stuff.co.nz/national/98729344/diary-of-a-november-2016-quake-evacuee-who-was-banished-from-work-and-home](http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/98729344/diary-of-a-november-2016-quake-evacuee-who-was-banished-from-work-and-home)

Matthew paints the parable according to his usual pattern of binary oppositions; for Matthew things are black or white, good or bad, wise or foolish. Here we have 10 young women, probably just in their early teens or pre-teens, as women were eligible to be married at age 12 then. According to local marriage custom, the bridegroom would come to the house of the bride to collect her and take her back to his home for the wedding banquet. Perhaps these bridesmaids are part of the groom's family, acting as his escort. Anyway five have spare flasks of oil and five don't. The bridegroom is delayed, a familiar motif of these chapters, perhaps reflecting the early church grappling with the delay of Jesus' promised coming or Parousia. We see this same grappling going on in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians where those grieving the loss of loved ones who have died, worry that they will have missed out on Jesus' gift of resurrection at his return. Paul assures them that living or dead, we belong to God and all will meet Jesus and be with him at his coming.

At midnight the bridegroom suddenly arrives. It would be dangerous and highly inappropriate for women to be out at night without light and so the foolish women ask for a loan of oil as their lamps are going out due to the delay. The wise women sound to us heartless but the reality is if they'd shared their oil, perhaps all the lamps would have gone out and they'd **all** have been left in the dark! The foolish ones go off in a protracted attempt to find someone awake enough to sell them some oil, and meanwhile the wise ones go into the banquet with the bridegroom and the door is shut.

When the foolish ones finally make it, they hear those chilling words, I do not know you, clearly reflecting Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 7: 21 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup>On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" <sup>23</sup>Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you".

Just what does it mean to be one of the **wise** here? The word for wise is *phronimos*, only used in the parables, and it suggests shrewd, prudent for your own self-preservation, able to fulfil your appointed role<sup>2</sup>, vigilant and well-prepared, open to wisdom for every day living, equipped for the long haul.

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Rushton, *Is my light still burning?* Tui Motu Interislands, October 2011, 26.

But one commentator, Barbara Reid<sup>3</sup>, suggests the wise ones here may actually be too self-protective, hoarding all the oil, so there's not enough to share with others, perhaps a large hint to Westerners to think about our attitude to resources and those who lack them in our world.

This parable was interpreted in the early church to refer to the spiritual resources we need to live out lives of discipleship. Oil then as now is a symbol of the anointing of God's Spirit, the life-giving energy which will enable us to offer compassion and love and to work for justice.

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Isaac of Nineveh<sup>4</sup> put it like this: 'There is a love, like a small lamp, which goes out when the oil is ended, or like a rain-fed stream which goes dry when the rain no longer feeds it. But there is a love, like a spring gushing from the earth, never to be exhausted.' This is the spring of living water Jesus promises the woman at the well in Samaria (John 4); Jesus' promise: "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." (John 7:38)

The earliest Christian house-church discovered in Syria has a wall fresco of women carrying torches and bowls approaching a white structure<sup>5</sup>. It is thought this could be a depiction of the parable of the bridesmaids but recast carrying torches and bowls of oil for the anointing of those to be baptised at Easter, recalling that the early church used nuptial imagery for the 'marriage' of the new Christian as part of the church, the bride of Christ, to the bridegroom, Christ.

We recall that in our NZPB baptism service, a candle is lit from the Paschal candle and given to the newly baptised with the words: 'Walk in the faith of Christ crucified and risen. Shine with the light of Christ'.

Jesus' final call is to Keep awake, to be alert for the bridegroom coming amongst us when we least expect it. Joy Cowley puts this well in her poem, **Neighbourhood Watch**<sup>6</sup>: 'Be alert for the outsider, the one who doesn't fit. Be alert for the one of no fixed abode. Be alert for the one who challenges authority. Be alert for the one who treats saints and murderers as equals, in the name of love. Be alert for the one who has no respect for property. Be alert for the one who turns your values upside down. Be alert for the one who disturbs your peace. Be alert for the one who follows you like a beggar, demanding your everything. Be alert for the one who conceals his identity in your heart. His name is Jesus.' Joy's words are as challenging as Jesus's!

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Reid, *Abiding Word: Sunday reflections for Year A*. Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2013, 119.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Reid, *ibid.* 119.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Peppard, *The world's oldest church: Bible, art and ritual at Dura-Europos, Syria*. Yale, 2016

<sup>6</sup> Joy Cowley, 'Neighbourhood Watch' in *Come and see*. Pleroma Christian Supplies, Waipukurau, 2008, 46.

But sometimes all we have left within us is to come to Jesus with the prayer of the old song, 'Give me oil in my heart, keep me burning till the break of day'.

These words I found encouraging from Joy Cowley's *Psalms for the Road*, called "**Little Lights**"<sup>7</sup>:

'Jesus spoke of little lights, candles, lamps, not great bonfires,  
Just small steady flames to brighten some dark corner of the house.

Come to think of it, Jesus always preached little – children, flowers,  
sparrows, the widow's mite, mustard seeds, loaves and fishes.

He didn't expect people to make great gestures.

I guess he knew that little is the currency of everyday living.

So let's thank God for little lights, the warm smile, the hug, the phone call, a  
wave from a passing car, a cup of tea, an open door, a talent freely shared.

How often, when my own candle has gone out, has someone relit it from  
their lamp of kindness. That can't happen with a big light. I mean, how close  
can you get to a supernova?'

So may we let our little lights shine before others that they may see our  
good works and give glory to our God in heaven (Mt 5:16). Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Joy Cowley, 'Little Lights' in *Psalms for the Road*. Catholic Supplies NZ Ltd, Wellington, 2002, 27.