

Matthew 25

¹ *'At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ² Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³ The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴ The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵ The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.*

⁶ *'At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"*

⁷ *'Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸ The foolish ones said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out."*

⁹ *"No," they replied, "there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves."*

¹⁰ *'But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.*

¹¹ *'Later the others also came. "Lord, Lord," they said, "open the door for us!" ¹² 'But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I don't know you."*

¹³ *'Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.*

Exodus 27 ²⁰ *'Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives for the light so that the lamps may be kept burning. ²¹ In the tent of meeting, outside the curtain that shields the ark of the covenant law, Aaron and his sons are to keep the lamps burning before the Lord from evening till morning. This is to be a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for the generations to come.*

Numbers 8: ² *'Speak to Aaron and say to him, "When you set up the lamps, see that all seven light up the area in front of the lampstand."*

³ *Aaron did so; he set up the lamps so that they faced forwards on the lampstand, just as the Lord commanded Moses*

Solomon place 10 such lampstands in the Temple

Revelation 1: ²⁰ *The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches*

Zechariah 4 (re the 2 olive branches feeding oil to the 7 branched lampstand) ¹⁴ *So he said, 'These are the two who are anointed to [or two who bring oil and] serve the Lord of all the earth.' [i.e. Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah and Joshua the high-priest]*

Revelation 11: ³ *And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.' ⁴ They are 'the two olive trees' and the two lampstands, and 'they stand before the Lord of the earth.'*

Lockdown again. Prepared for the first one – thought it would all be over after a couple of months, but even though we had a sort of break in the summer, here we are 8 months later, back in lockdown and not really sure when it is going to end. Just, how long is this winter going to last? How are we going to find the resources not only to survive, but to flourish, to continue to be calm, courageous and compassionate, as the Archbishops have exhorted us to be at this time?

Today's parable of the *wise and foolish virgins - or bridesmaids* – is the first of 3 parables in Matthew ch.25 all about getting ready for that time when our present world comes to an end and we meet Jesus face to face, whether that is when he comes in glory or when our life ends. In this parable, the wait is much longer than expected – *the Bridegroom* arrives much later than they anticipated. You will, I'm sure, remember how Jesus sometimes referred to himself as being the *Bridegroom* and the kingdom of God being like a wedding banquet, so it would have been very clear both to the disciples and Matthew's readers what this story is talking about.

One of the many joys of being Vicar of two quite rural parishes is that every so often you get what I call a Dibley event – the bride who was going to come up to the church by motor boat from the Beetle and Wedge. 30 minutes and Bride still not there. Eventually she arrived, impressively unflustered by her delay. She told me the reason for the delay – the boat had run out of petrol. Visions of bride floating helpless down the Thames further and further away from her wedding!

In actual fact, the boatman had run out of petrol on his way to pick up the bride. But here was someone who was certainly not properly prepared for his vital role in the wedding!

Custom for weddings to take place in the evening and for the Bridegroom to come to the Bride's house for the celebrations before taking her back to their new marriage home. The role of the virgins – the bride's unmarried friends was first to welcome the bridegroom and light his way into the bride's house and then later to light the way of the bride and groom back to the new marriage home. Needless to say, it was quite common for the groom to begin celebrating with his groomsmen or maybe getting up Dutch courage before he even leaves his house and the possibilities of arriving late are quite common.

Key point of the story is being ready, but continuing to being prepared – even if the wait is long. I want to draw out 3 things

First, All the bridesmaids outwardly were the same. They may well like today have worn the same festal robes, they all had lamps, they were all looking forward to the coming of the Bridegroom and they probably all thought they were prepared and ready.

However, some weren't as prepared as they thought they were. It seems their lamps lit, but they hadn't checked how much oil there was still in the lamp – or maybe they thought *'The groom will be here in a couple of hours, I've got plenty enough oil for that'* But when the groom arrived much later than they expected, their oil was all used up and their lamps began to flicker and flicker and go out.

What does *'having enough oil'* mean or symbolize?

In the great temple in Jerusalem there were ten 7-branched lampstands. These lamps produced the light which enabled the priests both to offer their worship to God and minister to the people. The priests had to make sure that the lamps had a good supply of oil. So in Jesus' story the oil that enables the lamp to produce light is that which enables us to worship God and let our light shine before men – to serve God and be witnesses to his light and love amongst others.

Towards the end of OT times, the prophet *Zechariah* has a vision of one of these 7-branched lampstands in the Temple being fed with oil from an olive tree on either side. When he asks the angel what these 2 olive trees are, he is told: *'These are the two who are anointed to [or the two who bring oil and] serve the Lord of all the earth.'* i.e. *Zerubbabel*, the anointed governor – or king of Judah – and *Joshua* the anointed high priest. These 2 men are together a picture of Jesus our *Messiah – our anointed King and high-priest*. It is Jesus who supplies the oil, the life-giving power, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus which enables us to shine with his light. It is no coincidence that on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit came and spread to each disciple it appeared as a flame on each disciple's head.

So how do we make sure that we have enough oil – enough of the Holy Spirit? Well it's clear from this parable that it's no good relying on old supplies because after a while they run out! It's no good relying on your baptism, or a time in the past when you faithfully followed God or an old spiritual experience. We need constantly to come into the presence of Jesus and open our hearts to him to his Spirit and to his Word which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. If we are to keep burning brightly, we need constantly to renew the supply of oil otherwise it will run out.

Secondly, This is why the foolish bridesmaids could not 'borrow' oil from their wiser friends.

We need to have our own relationship with Jesus. Others may encourage us and guide us, but no-one can do it for us.

Only I can open up my own heart to the Spirit of Jesus each day.

Finally, we should not overlook the severe warning that Jesus gives in this parable (as in fact, he does in the other two *Matthew 25* parables): ¹¹ *'Later the [foolish bridesmaids] also came. "Lord, Lord," they said, "open the door for us!"* ¹² *'But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I don't know you."* Jesus then said:

¹³ *'Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.'*

If we continue to neglect our relationship with Jesus, eventually our oil will run out. Yes we can of course renew that supply at any time, but the longer we leave it, the less likely we are to recognise our need and so Jesus is saying watch out for it might be too late.

So in this time of waiting – waiting for longer than what we expected - let's check our oil supplies: what are we doing to ensure that our relationship with Jesus is being renewed and refreshed day by day? Jesus the Bridegroom stands at the door and knocks – He longs to come in and eat with you, to spend quality time with you, for Him and you to open your hearts to each other. The question is: are you ready?