

Keeping your lamp lit

Matthew 25.1-13 & Amos 5.18-24

Heavenly father. Send your Holy Spirit to touch our hearts, anoint my lips, so that we may give praise to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Imagine the darkest of darkest nights: inky black, so when you put your hand in front of your face, you cannot see it.

With all our artificial light polluting our skies, that's quite difficult to imagine, but for the 10 bridesmaids in Jesus' story, who were waiting to escort a prospective bridegroom to his destination, this was the challenge before them.

The groom may well have travelled from a neighbouring village. Unfamiliar with the streets, he was entirely reliant on the bridesmaids doing their job of guiding him, with their lamps, to the wedding banquet.

It was a great honour: the thrill of excitement at being invited to such a task would have been very exciting, and they would have been dressed for the party, no doubt excited and giggling, waiting in eager anticipation for the gentlemen to arrive. And, of course, when they got to the banquet, the festivities would go on for some considerable time.

Like all Jesus parables, there is an unexpected twist: the groom is delayed. Night falls, gradually the ten drift off to sleep, their lamps are still burning.

And then, without warning he arrives. The ten awake and scramble to their feet, and reach for their lamps, which have, of course, been burning for hours.

The wicks, after burning for so long, would have been black and sooty, so they would need to trim them so that they would burn cleaner and brighter. And as they lifted their lamps, they would have realised there wasn't enough oil.

All of them would have scabbled about trying to get the lamps refilled super-fast in order to run out to the groom, and then, of course, that sickening feeling for 5 of them as they realised to their horror they did not have any spare oil.

Frantic, they would have pleaded with the 5 who did, but to no avail. The 5 wise bridesmaids refused.

Now, the custom of escorting the bridegroom to the wedding banquet, is not something we are familiar with. Neither are we familiar with relying on the small amount of light given off by a lamp in the absolute dark of night.

But to those listening to Jesus' words, they would have all nodded their heads in understanding.

They would have known, that when you hold a lamp to guide a person's path, there is only enough light for you and the other person. Everyone else around you would have been in the shadows and therefore unrecognisable.

The bridesmaids could not share their oil, because then they would not have enough oil to guide the groom through the streets to the banquet.

Better to have 5 lamps burning brightly than all 10 run out and the whole wedding party stumbling about in the streets in darkness.

By the time the foolish bridesmaids get their oil, they arrive too late to the banquet. The groom, who has no idea who they are - he has never met them, because they're strangers – of course, bars their way.

By not having enough oil in their lamps, they bring total disaster upon themselves: a disturbing ending.

Having enough oil in their lamps was fundamental to the success of the bridesmaids. None of them wanted to run out, but 5 did.

They simply weren't prepared for the long haul.

When Jesus told this parable it was, I believe, in part, a way of comforting his followers long after his ascension into heaven.

You see the early church believed that it was only going to be a couple of years before Jesus' 2nd coming. There was a real sense of urgency to their mission, often reflected in the words of people like the apostle Paul, who gave advice such as 'if you not married don't bother, just get on with spreading the Good News', that kind of thing.

But as the years went by the church realised that the 2nd coming might not be when they thought. In fact, they couldn't estimate when it would be at all.

I suspect it was then, that parables like this one, would have taken on a deeper and more profound significance.

How do we sustain our faith through the long haul?

Remaining faithful and true to Jesus can go through different periods in our lives, like day and night. There are times when faith seems safe and secure, and familiar. Praying, reading our bibles, coming to church: all comfortable landmarks in our days and weeks: a little like walking round your house during the day; you know where everything is, and it feels safe.

And if you light a candle in the bright of day, then you can easily find the candle and the boxes of matches to use.

But if you wait till you are in complete darkness, when there is a power cut for instance, then lighting the candle becomes a much harder task. And without the light from the candle everything around you quickly becomes strange and unfamiliar, even dangerous, as you fall over chairs and walk into tables! Nobody enjoys a power cut in the middle of the night!

At some point in all our lives we go through dark times. We experience feelings of uncertainty, confusion and anxiety, just like many of us are feeling during this coronavirus.

It is in these moments that we look for God: we seek Him out; we call to him in the dead of night; we seek refuge and safety in him.

Sometimes our faith is no more than a tiny flickering night-light, but just enough to gently guide us through. But other times it is bright and illuminating.

The analogy of the oil lamp is a powerful one. Most of the time we are not aware of how much faith oil we have in our own lamps, until we are faced with dark and difficult times.

But I do know that filling an oil lamp, and lighting it, is much easier in daylight than it is in the dark of the night.

Nurturing our faith - our relationship with Jesus through prayer, worship and reading our bibles - are all essential life giving activities, especially when the day is bright.

Getting in the habit of thanking God for good things, as well as asking for help, is part of a healthy prayer life; a healthy relationship with Jesus.

Fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ all makes a difference.

Sharing our stories of faith with each other, even those little moments when we look back and recognise the Holy Spirit at work in our lives – that ‘Aha!’ moment. And when we speak about those times, with each other, our faith grows along with our courage.

Creating a safe place, where we can share our worries and doubts, asking questions because you don’t understand, even if you think everyone else does, is actually really important.

Being honest about our relationship with God – because it is a relationship – and when we talk about it, it keeps its alive.

We need to be there for each other, and to help each other.

All these things help to keep our oil lamps full; our relationship with Jesus alive and vibrant, and ready for those times when we feel the dark clouds gathering.

Jesus invites us all to journey with him to the eternal banquet. Each of us is given a lamp, and we all have a choice about how full we keep it.

I pray, that one day we'll all be stood at the doorway to the banquet together. And as Jesus looks at each one of us, his face will light-up with recognition. He will look at each one of us and say: "Brother, sister, I'm so glad you made it. It's time to party". Amen