

Sunday between 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> November [32]

Matthew 25:1-13

I don't know if any of you are fans of disaster films but there is one that came out a few years ago which speaks of today's gospel in its title. It begins with a question –Where will you be the day after tomorrow? The scenario is that due to problems with the ozone layer the polar ice cap melts creating all sorts of natural disasters which sweep across the earth. The trailer is quite amazing but the most significant thing is the question posed in the title: 'The day after tomorrow.' The truth is that no one can actually answer that question. No one can say for certain where they will be the day after tomorrow. We may look at a diary or a schedule and think I will be in X at Y the day after tomorrow but there is not guarantee that X and Y will happen. The context of these first 13 verses of Matthew 25 is to be found in Matthew 24 and Jesus' teaching about the end of time. To help his hearers understand Jesus' then tells some parables – earthly stories with a heavenly meaning. In the parable of the wise and foolish maidens Jesus speaks about the future and the consequences of being prepared and unprepared for his return.

At the time of Christ marriage rituals were different to our experience. Once a groom had paid the wedding price to the father of the bride a period of a year would elapse. During that time the groom would go back to his home and prepare it for the arrival of his bride. When the right moment had arrived he would set off to the bride's house to bring her 'home.' A great procession would be the order of the day and everyone in the procession would have their own torch/lamp. To be in the procession without a lamp/torch meant that you were a gate crasher to the wedding celebrations and you would be locked out when the groom reached his home. That is the background to the story that Christ begins to tell in verse 1. Notice that in verse 1 it tells us that all 10 maidens had lamps. No one was without a lamp. Remember that for the moment.

Jesus goes on to point out that only 5 of the maidens took oil with them as they went out to await the arrival of the groom. The other 5, whom he calls foolish, for whatever reason did not bother to bring oil for their lamps. Again note that the oil was freely available to all 10. It is not the case that only 5 of them had access to the oil, all 10 had access. Only 5 however, bothered to bring the oil for the lamps with them. The sole distinction between them is the presence of oil for their lamps. So there must be something significant about the 'oil' here.

The wise and foolish maidens look the same. To those around them there is no visible difference – but a time is coming when the difference will be revealed for all to see. Both the wise and the foolish maidens of the parable have good intentions – they both set out to meet the bridegroom, but only one group are prepared for his arrival. However, the other group are present but they are not prepared. You see it is one thing to be present but another thing to be paying attention and to be ready for the coming of the bridegroom.

Then for whatever reason there is a delay in the arrival of the bridegroom and both groups settle down to rest. Verse 6 begins very dramatically. Jesus says 'At midnight the cry rang out'. We often play at weddings here comes the bride – but at the time of Christ it would have been here comes the groom. Do you remember as a child playing hide and seek? You counted to 10, or whatever number it was and then you shouted 'Ready or not, here I come!' It is easy, when you read this parable, for this shout to come immediately to mind. 'Ready or not, here I come!' That is exactly what occurs here. The shout goes up that the groom has come for his bride and the 10 maidens immediately waken up and begin to trim their lamps. But for 5 of them there is something wrong – they have no oil and their lamps are going out. The moment they have been waiting for has arrived. The one they have been waiting for has

arrived, unexpectedly and they are not prepared. The foolish maidens immediately turn to the wise, who have oil, and ask for some but they are met with a disappointing answer.

You might think the response of the 5 wise maidens was harsh but it is not. Remember the beginning of the parable – all 10 had lamps, all 10 had access to oil for those lamps. There is nothing harsh in their reply at all – they are wise – they know that the oil in their lamps is sufficient only for themselves – they cannot share it. There is no joy for them in others being excluded. They even tell the foolish maidens where to go to get the oil.

Then we read a very sad appendix to the parable. The five foolish maidens come back to the house of the groom – but they find the door tightly shut. They cry out for admittance but it is too late – all those with oil in their lamps are safely inside and the door is tightly closed. The groom tells them that he does not know them. They know him but he does not know them. He hears them, he answers them but he does not know them. They know him. They know where he is to be found. They know on whom they are to call for admittance to the banquet of the groom but it all comes too late. He does not know them.

So what do we learn here from the words of Christ in this parable? Can you tell who are the wise and who are the foolish ones here this morning? Sitting here this morning are likely to be wise and foolish alike. All of us have been given a lamp (a life, a soul) but the truth is that some are foolish because they have no oil for the lamp.

Here is what Christ meant by oil. He meant 'grace,' his grace. Do you remember at the start of this sermon that the groom paid a price for his bride. Christ paid a price for his bride, for you and me, for his Church. That price was his life, his blood, shed on the cross. That oil (grace) was, and is, available to all 10 maidens in the parable but only 5 took it with them. Those who were ready and willing were able to receive it. The other 5 chose not to take it.

The same is true here and now. This grace is available to all, but not all receive it. They may have thought the others have brought more than enough – we can get some of theirs. But the truth of this parable is that you cannot share in someone else's portion of grace, you must have your own oil for your own lamp when the groom comes for his bride. When Christ comes you will not be able to borrow someone else's relationship with him. You will not be able to share or borrow another person's experience of sins forgiven and grace received. It will be too late.

'The Day After Tomorrow' is only a film – this real life. One day Christ is coming back for his bride, his church, his people. He will come like a thief in the night when no one is expecting him. This morning we have the opportunity to collect the oil of grace, to ensure we are ready – it is a simple matter of inviting Christ into your life.

God the Father is counting and he is about to shout 'Ready or not here I come!' How will you be found? Ready or not?