

Shining the light as we wait

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Bible reading: Matthew 25:1-13

O Lord our God, you have given your word to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Help us to receive your truth in faith and love, that we may follow your will and live for your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the United States, a version of this very parable has been playing out. Lots of people were expecting an election result perhaps as early as Tuesday night. But then it was Wednesday, and then Thursday, and even until last night, everyone was still waiting. Waiting, if not for the Messiah, at least for a clear answer on who the president will be and how the country is going to look for the next four years. This waiting, in expectation, is precisely the kind of situation that this parable was written to address.

In America, it now seems clear that Joe Biden has won the Whitehouse, but Donald Trump hasn't conceded yet and nobody knows quite what's going to happen in the meantime. There are still a number of steps to go through until the administration is settled. Even if the end result seems reasonably clear, the bridegroom has not yet arrived.

At this end of Matthew's gospel Jesus is addressing the preparedness of his disciples to live and work through the time, however long, between his death and resurrection and the fullness of the kingdom of Jesus, the glorious bridegroom. The fullness of the kingdom is represented by the wedding party celebration. At the time of the parable's first telling wedding parties involved the bridesmaid hanging out at the bride's parent's house, waiting for the groom to come along to let them know that the party was ready and escort them to his parents' house. This is part of the ultimate promise of the gospel: that just as Jesus rose from death so there is the promise that we will meet him in the coming fullness of God's kingdom. We start to encounter God's reign within and among us now, but there is also an element which is to come, for which we look forward.

Four years ago, you may remember that when Donald Trump was elected in America, there was a lot of speculation about whether either he, or America, would survive a four-year term of office. It seemed like it would be endless. But here we are, and four years has already passed. On the scale of the world and the history of God and creation, a couple of thousand years from the time of Jesus' death and resurrection can seem from one end like it stretches forever, and yet, the time passes.

And one of the points of the parable is this: we often live under the illusion that we have all the time in the world, so far as important things are concerned. Maybe we are busy with lots of urgent things, or maybe we procrastinate, or maybe there are other things going on, but we often put off important things, like reconciling with people or making contact with people we love or nurturing our relationship with God and our care for ourself, thinking that we will have time to do it later. But that's not always so. There does come a time when it is too late.

There are leaders in various parts of the world who act as though action on climate change can wait, because the worst impacts of climate change are in the future; but the time comes.

In your life, are there things that you sense that the Holy Spirit is calling you to do that you put off? This parable is a reminder to act while the opportunity is available.

Within the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, there's another layer of symbolism going on, too. In Matthew's gospel we've previously heard the point that we are to be light to the world, and that no-one lights a lamp and hides it under a basket. Letting our light shine is a metaphor for living out our faith. You could imagine a whole lot of things that that "light" can refer to: it can be about sharing in community in faith and prayer; it can be about taking action for justice and doing acts of kindness and service, and working for reconciliation and peace. If these are the things of the light, and if the oil for these oil lamps is about faithfulness in action, then one of the difficult aspects of the parable might make a little more sense: the problem of people being shut out.

In the parable, when the time does come, some of the bridesmaids have run out of oil, and have no light. The imagery can be recognised as a metaphor for whether the disciples have nurtured their spiritual reserves to go the distance and shine the light. We have to put the time in, ourselves, to share in community and nurture our relationships with God and with each other. There's a very personal element to this. When the foolish bridesmaids aren't prepared, those kinds of spiritual reserves don't just come out of nowhere and can't just be given.

And then the parable sounds pretty harsh: *those who aren't prepared have missed out*. But I think there's truth in that statement framed just like that: if you don't make the choices to nurture the light, and to live our justice, mercy, and walking with God, then you are already missing out. Those who aren't prepared have missed out.

But God does want us to share in the celebrations of the light. Jesus has been saying this throughout Matthew's gospel. But along the way, just like waiting for an election result, there can be challenges in maintaining balance and grace: not being glued to the count with anxiety, not just ignoring and hoping it all goes away, but recognising that there is a future coming and committing to working for good, shining light, and attending to that which is important in the meantime; so that when the bridegroom comes we are well prepared.

To the glory of God.

Amen.