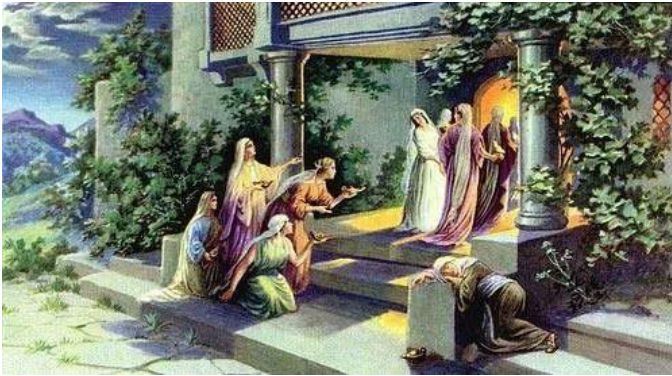


## High St Uniting Church Frankston

### What keeps the oil in your lamp?

### Matthew 25:1 – 13



You will be familiar with the adage, 'A picture is worth a thousand words.' However, what I discovered running a scrapbooking store and teaching people about making photo albums is that a picture without context is almost worthless. Some need a thousand words to allow the viewer to understand and appreciate the image. It's not a big stretch to see the same applying to a parable, particularly one like today's

story of the maids waiting for the bridegroom. Simple metaphor or analogy escapes us, and therefore the message escapes us, because we need a lot of words and explanation about Middle eastern wedding practices. Why is the bridegroom arriving at an unknown time? Why is the door locked on the imprudent maidens? Is staying awake the important part or is having extra oil the important part? In the story, all the maidens fall asleep, and yet only half of them are called foolish, or imprudent. And yet Jesus' message at the end is to "Keep awake!" We don't know enough about wedding practices in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judea to fully describe this parable, but the sense of the story is being prepared for an unscheduled event. "Be prepared" is probably a better message than "Keep awake". It's easy to give up on the effort and energy and vitality of attending to all the issues of injustice and oppression and cruelty and need around us, but we are advised to "Be prepared", so that, when the Christ arrives, he'll find you doing your job.

In chapters 24 and 25, Matthew has this series of parables that have that dual message – "look to the future in hope, the time when God will fulfill the promise of creation, but in the meantime, here is the way you are to live as the people of God in my name". There is a parable about servants misbehaving while the master is away. A parable about the use of the master's assets while he is on a journey, and finally the parable of judgement based on the way people live out the love of God. Today's wedding parable sits in the middle of those and picks up both these themes – waiting and faithfulness. There are a lot of commentators and writers and churches so focussed on the first theme – the waiting for Jesus to return and bring in the promised kingdom – that they miss the second one and fail to remain attentive to the needs and issues here and now. They are like the imprudent young women who are so keen to welcome the bridegroom and get into the feast that they forget to attend to their job of lighting the way for the bridal procession. That is the point of this parable. Where we can become distracted by all the mysterious details of this wedding organisation from another culture – is this the groom coming to take the bride from her family home, or the bride and groom returning to the groom's home? - the single point of the parable is that the so called 'foolish' bridesmaids – more correctly, lacking forethought - didn't have enough oil when the point of need arrived. They forgot that they weren't just waiting, they were waiting with a purpose. As the Iona community puts it:

not waiting like waiting for a bus, we are waiting like waiting at tables.

Now it's all very well to point to the main lesson of this parable – while waiting for the coming of the kingdom in its fulness, remain attentive to the purpose of the kingdom now – but it begs the whole question. How? How do we remain attentive to the deeper issue of

the will of God when the world keeps dragging at our sleeves saying, “what about your comfort, what about your security, what about your image, what about your looks, etc”? What brings life to your faith? Is coming to church, reading the Bible, praying, sharing, helping others, a delight, or a chore? It’s all very well for me to call us all to the tasks of the church and our faith each week, but where do you find the energy and the drive to actually go out and follow Jesus in the world?

What keeps you awake to the needs of the world and the call of the Gospel? What keeps the oil in your lamp?

We are all different, with different needs and interests and personalities. But we all need to be aware, not just of the will of God but how we each maintain our connection to the will of God.

- For some the oil remains stocked up through prayer and a healthy spiritual life. Attending to the relationship with God and listening to the still, small voice calling you to love, to faith and the hope.
- For some the oil remains stocked up through scripture reading and good commentaries that call out the questions and seek deeper attention. Seeing the depth of God’s love and concern for the whole creation.
- For some the oil is restocked through using it in acts of love, volunteering for mission and ministry and looking after friends and neighbours. Working for the kingdom brings the joy of love in action.
- For some the oil is restocked through communing with nature and attending to the life of plants and insects and animals. Seeing ourselves as a part of the wonder of God’s creation and walking through what some call God’s other scripture.
- For some the oil is replenished in seeking the quiet times and reflection and meditation. Taking the time away from the demands and the pressures and letting the soul restore.
- And for some the community of faith and shared worship is what recharges the oil in the lamp. Feeling the shared faith of the community and being reassured that we are not on this walk of faith alone.

Whether you are waiting – many of us yearning – for the fulfilment of the kingdom and the completion of God’s creation or waiting for a revival of faith in our culture, that waiting is not disconnected from the world. God’s way and will are, as they have always been, about what Jesus called ‘the weightier matters of the Law. Justice, mercy, faith, love; bringing God’s way and will close to people who need to know the presence of God. We are waiting with a purpose.

To extend the metaphor from the parable, we are waiting to shine in greeting, to welcome the coming kingdom and so we need to be aware of what makes us shine. Find the joy, find the source of the oil for your faith so that you can be part of the people of God in Jesus Christ; connected to God’s will and attentive to the growth and health of the kingdom AND awake to the need for the kingdom in the hurting, damaged world around us.