

Oil in our Lamps

Wisdom 6.12-20 Matthew 25.1-12

What is the 'good news' for us today? It is a question worth asking whenever we find ourselves in periods of difficulty, distress, or confusion. It is a question worth asking when we read and hear God's word to us in Scripture. What does God want us to hear today, today on this Remembrance Sunday in our Church of England calendar.

This Sunday is a day on which we traditionally remember those who have died in acts of war---particularly those who have served in the armed forces, in wars throughout these past 2 centuries—and have lost their lives in service to their country and the ideals which that country upholds.

As we worship together here today, each in our own homes, we can already be grateful that we feel safe and secure in the cities and towns in which we live, we feel safe within the borders of our countries and on this European continent. As we look around the world, we realise just how fragile peace and safety and security are, and how necessary it is to work actively to preserve the processes and protocols which allow for free and fair elections, for the hearing of the voices of all citizens and residents of the countries, how necessary it is to work actively to ensure that all people are given fair and equal opportunities to grow and flourish in their personal and family life.

It is all too easy for us to take this for granted and assume that the work has been done once and for all both for us and for future generations. We can see, if we look, that this is not so. Carelessness with democratic processes, personal ambition, greed, indifference, selfishness, and the denigration of others who are different from us, all lead easily to a breakdown in good government, a divided and angry society, and a diminishing of wellbeing of peoples and nations.

The conflicts of the Second World War are still relatively fresh in the collective memory, despite the fact that the generation of servicemen and women who survived that conflict are now slowly and surely dying. It is for us to remember and keep alive the memory of how easily we, who consider ourselves to be civilized, can fall into brutality, cruelty and evil—both through active participation in it, but also by merely standing by as we watch evil take over around us. It has been repeated often that 'The only thing necessary for evil to flourish is that good people stand by and do nothing.'

I am quoting generically, and in fact it is not clear whether this quote comes from Edmund Burke or earlier from John Stuart Mills, but that is not important. It is a reminder to us that we each, as individuals, must take responsibility.

In our reading from Matthew's Gospel today, we hear of wise and foolish young women. This story is not concerned with whether or not these young women are beautiful or happy or good conversationalists. What is fundamental in this story is whether or not they are wise. It is fundamental to the women in this story...it is fundamental to OUR lives as Christians.

In this parable, we see that to be wise is to think ahead, to be prepared, and to take responsibility for that readiness, to have our lamps filled with oil. This parable speaks to us about the coming of Jesus— about our need to be prepared to participate fully in his kingdom. We can think of the oil in our lamps as the oil of God's spirit at work within us.

It is not enough to hold up a pretty lamp—it is not enough to have a dazzling exterior...what is required is the oil, the substance...

For Christians it is not enough to hold lovely worship services, to maintain beautiful buildings, and to mark the traditional festivals. What is necessary for Christians, and for the world, is that there is substance to our faith; the substance of God's Holy Spirit at work in us. And it is the responsibility of each of us to pray regularly, to read and study God's holy word in Scripture, to examine our own attitudes and behaviours, to repent of our sins, and to seek to serve God in the service of others. The church then, might be defined simply, as the group of people seeking to take responsibility together for preparing ourselves to live fully under the gentle and just rule of God in Jesus Christ.

This is kingdom which the Book of Wisdom speaks of. In Christian tradition, both Jesus himself and the Holy Spirit have been likened to Wisdom—wisdom made visible and active. To be wise is to model our lives on the life of Jesus, to be wise is to allow the Holy Spirit to be the oil in our lamps, the fuel of our lives, the light which shines for us in darkness, and which shines in hope of the full realization of the rule of love, or peace, or justice, of the prospering of all peoples and nations.

What is the good news then for us today? The good news is just how much we have to be grateful for if we simply take a moment to consider it. The good news is that the kingdom of God is near to us, it is in our hearts and minds. The good news is that Christ himself gives us the gift of faith, he gives us the oil we need for our lamps to burn brightly. Let us accept the gift and open our lives that we may be continually replenished with the oil which gives substance to our faith.

Amen.

A sermon preached by Revd Canon Vickie Sims, Sunday 8th November 2020, 9.30 am
Facebook LIVE Morning Prayer.