

Date: November 8

Reading: Matthew 25:1 – 13

Theme: What keeps the oil in your lamp?



Those of you with younger members in the family will have heard the word ‘woke’. It’s a slang term, taken from African American political activism, that means ‘attentive to important issues of racial and social justice’. The Black Lives Matter campaign is just one aspect of what it means to ‘stay woke’. What interests me is that ‘stay woke’ is nothing more than a hip appropriation of the words of Jesus, “Keep awake therefore, for you do not know the day or the hour”. Because all the young women in the parable of the Late Bridegroom fell asleep, not just the ones labelled foolish, it’s clear that Jesus is not talking about physical sleep. When he says, ‘keep awake’, he’s not calling us to some Herculean effort to not sleep. We aren’t being asked to be constantly alert and vigilant like meerkats on watch. ‘Keep awake’ is exactly what ‘woke’ is calling for now; maintain your awareness and action on the greater matters of God’s will – love, justice, mercy, compassion. It is easy to fall into the easy way of going about your life attending to your comfort and success and lifestyle and leave the running of the world to others – to metaphorically fall asleep. 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. And Jesus says, “Keep awake!” Not just keep awake and on watch to see when the long awaited ‘bridegroom’ arrives, but to keep awake in the sense that, when the bridegroom arrives, he’ll find you doing your job.

In the way that Matthew has constructed his gospel, the parables in chapters 24 and 25, including the one we are looking at today, form Jesus final address to his disciples. Matthew seems to be inspired by Deuteronomy and Moses final address to the people of Israel, where he tells the people to be faithful and follow the Law and look for the coming of the prophet ‘like Moses’. So 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. This 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 foolish 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, the single point of the parable is that the so called ‘foolish’ bridesmaids didn’t have enough oil when the point of need arrived. They were not just waiting, they

were waiting with a purpose, and they forgot the purpose. I say 'so called foolish' because it isn't the best translation of the Greek. In Greek, the term is 'lacking forethought', and the other young women are 'prudent'. And so, we come back to this idea of 'woke'. The young women with the faltering lamps did not remain attentive to the important issues.

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 keep up the supply of oil for our lamps of faith? 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"? So, what keeps you woke to the world? 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 stacked 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.

If we were in a normal church service now, I would invite you to turn to your neighbour and discuss what keeps the oil in your lamp. And that is doubly sad because this time of restriction and isolation makes this question even more important. When we can't visit and can't gather and can't go out into the country and can't go to volunteer, our oil can run very low. It's hard to stay awake. It's hard to stay connected. It's hard to stay faithful. Particularly for those who find no joy in electronic connection and crave human society. But even though we are not gathered, the question remains alive and necessary; what keeps the

oil in your lamp? If you haven't asked the question, or thought through what you are missing most, the oil may be running low without you even knowing.

We are waiting – many of us yearning – for the fulfilment of the kingdom and the completion of God's creation. However, that waiting is not disconnected from the world because the kingdom began with Jesus and we are a part of what it is now. We are waiting with a purpose. As the Iona community put it:

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

To take the metaphor from the parable, we are waiting to shine to greet the coming kingdom and so we need to be aware of what makes us shine. Be 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.

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