

8th November 2020 - Matthew 25:1-13 – Pentecost +23 – Chris’s Sermon



“...The kingdom of heaven is like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamp...

And, of course, our story tells us that the bridegroom was delayed and the oil in the lamps ran dry. As a consequence, the foolish bridesmaids missed the wedding feast while they searched for oil, while the five wise bridesmaids were welcomed in and joined the celebration.

In our Gospel today, we are asked to be ready – we’re asked to be prepared to receive God when he comes. Awake and ready to serve, with our lamps lit – yes, we’re asked to be ready.

At first glance, Jesus seems to be warning the disciples against complacency – he seems to be calling them to remain vigilant through the long hours of the night. And, he draws a direct comparison between the bridesmaids who are prepared and wait patiently for the bridegroom to return and the disciples who are called to follow in his footsteps – the disciples who are called to be steadfast in their faith.

But, I think there’s another message here as well. Our Gospel reading today is ultimately a story about death and resurrection. The bridesmaids experience death and resurrection. Now, before we go any further, I think it’s important to remember that most of the stories that we read about and celebrate in the Gospels – the uplifting stories – the hope filled stories – these are all stories about death and resurrection.

When Jesus heals the two blind men (Matt 9:27-31) – they call out to him “have mercy on us, Son of David...”. And, Jesus responds to their faith – he calls them out of darkness and despair – and he restores them to fullness of life – the blind men are given their sight and restored to their rightful place in the community. (This is a story about death and resurrection.) The same can be said for the two Gadarene Demoniacs - tormented by demons. They are tormented – living alone in tombs on the outskirts of town. And, then, they are touched by God - set free and called back to life. (Again, this is a story about death and resurrection.) And, we see this over and over again in scripture.

Over the last couple of weeks, we’ve talked about the cost of discipleship. We talked about our calling to stand firm in our faith and remain steadfast. And, we were reminded that this can be a difficult calling – to stand firm against injustice and neglect (it goes against the grain) – to stand with the poor and the vulnerable. As a people of faith, we talk often about the power and the glory of the Good News – this message of hope that we are called to share. But, while life-giving to many, today we are also reminded that this Gospel won’t always be well received. At times, it will be a difficult calling – we too will experience death and resurrection, as we live out our faith.

I think we see something of this in our Gospel reading today. In our reading, Jesus paints a picture of five faithful servants who struggle to remain awake with their lamps lit, while waiting for the bridegroom to return. The servants are called to wait patiently – without any assurances. According to the reading, the servants don't know when the bridegroom will return – in the evening – late at night – the following day – or not at all.

And, I think the experience of these servants can become a metaphor for our faith – for the challenges that we will experience, as we live our faith on a daily basis. At times, like the bridesmaids, we too will feel tired and alone – at times we will have doubts – we may even feel, at times, tempted to walk away from our calling – to give it all away.

The death of a loved one – a loss – grief – fear or perhaps it will be the experience of feeling truly tired and worn out - unappreciated. At times in our lives, we will feel like the faithful bridesmaids struggling to stay awake, waiting for the blessings of a God who appears to be absent. This is the dark night of the soul – the experience of death – the dark hour before the dawn.

Having said this, while our Gospel acknowledges this experience – for the bridesmaids – the disciples and even you and I, our reading also talks about a time of resurrection as well. Our reading describes a time of renewal and community – the blessing of love and renewed hope that we are called to share and celebrate. After all, the bridesmaids who do remain awake with their lamps lit are welcomed into the wedding feast – they experience resurrection – they share the feast.

Again, in a broad sense, our Gospel calls us to hold onto this faith while we wait – to remain steadfast during the long hours of the night – strengthened by our hope and trust.

Is this easier said than done? At times, yes. At times, we will struggle with this calling – this call to be steady - to trust in a God of renewal and resurrection.

And, prayer is important – it's probably the most important thing that we do – as Christians. That might sound strange to some of you – what about outreach to the poor – feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. We've just talked about the Good News - and yes, these ministries are very important – the visible actions of caring and committed Christians. But, we are justified by our faith – like the bridesmaids. Our relationship with God is the foundation of all that we do and say in God's name, And, prayer is the fuel for that relationship.

I believe that regular daily prayer is the most important thing that we do as Christians – it sets us up for the day – it reminds us our calling and it also has the power to strengthen us in during the long hours of the night, when we feel tired – when we doubt – when we are tempted to fall away. This is what it means for us to have our lamps lit and full.

In our Gospel, the bridegroom of the house is compared to our loving and generous God. Through prayer, we are equipped and strengthened in our work – as we wait for the one who will welcome us to his table to share a full measure of his grace - the blessings he so freely gives.

The Lord be with you.