Sermon Archive 610

Sunday 8 November, 2026
Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch
Reading: Matthew 25: 1-13
Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack

KNOX CHURCH
love faith outreach community justice

Reflection Number One

I have this most beautiful lamp. It's proportions are perfect, its presentation elegant. When Brasso is applied, with a little elbow grease, it positively sparkles. It has a solemnity to it - like it's base is solid enough for it not to tip or tumble - you could say it has gravitas and poise. It sits on one of my more gracious pieces of furniture, and quietly whispers to my visitors "the home owner here has taste". Gemütlich, style, cultivation and grace. Charm and dignity, noblesse and culture.

Does it work? Of course not. It doesn't "work". It's not a bloody plastic torch.

I ministered in a church that had a very beautiful building, and a privileged location. It's outside walls were Australian sandstone, and the lantern on the roof had that gracious patina that copper gets after some decades in the air. Inside it was all Queensland maple and burnished bronze organ pipes. The stained glass (upstairs and downstairs) was high quality. Having extended a welcome in 1970, to Her Majesty the Queen, one of our pews was known as the "royal" pew. On Australia Day every year, with Macquarie Street turned into a pedestrian area, the St Stephen's hand bills invited the public to enjoy Devonshire teas and inspect our Art Deco heritage lavatories. Gemütlich, style, cultivation and grace. Charm and dignity, noblesse and culture.

Did it work? Of course not! It didn't work - because there was no oil to light the flame. Burned by that experience (irony, that one can be burned by a lack of flame), the minister later asked another parish who were forming an invitation, "is there any love here?" He asked the question because he'd worked in an empty lamp, and didn't want to do that again.

I have told this story in a particular way - that kind of appears to be making fun of what is posh. That's not really what I want to achieve. Not every church needs to be ugly or vulgar. Beauty is a lovely thing. The question I want to explore, through entertaining the idea of the five lamps that had no oil, so shed no light, is "is faith meant to work?" Is it a delightful bauble, or does it have a job to do? A function to perform, a service to render, fruit to produce?

In the parable, half the lamps, designed for a particular function, have no chance of fulfilling that function. The function seems to be to welcome the bridegroom, the late-arriving bridegroom. There is an emptiness where there should be oil. God bless us, prompt us, that there may be oil - for the shining of light.

Reflection Number Two

There was this quite long period in Western history called the "Dark Ages". What was the darkness? Well, part of it was the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire - the demise of the culture of which Europe had been proud (creeping decadence, political fragmentation, economic decline - the failing of the infrastrcture). Part of it was the Plague that ravaged Europe - visiting big cities and little communities alike, leaving no one standing. Part of it was the supersitition and fear that came with that - (why has this happened to us?), the begging and bargaining for mercy - if you save us God, we'll flaggelate ourselves - offering you our suffering.

In the Thirteenth Century, a young monk called Thomas Aquinas gave attention to the idea of intelligent design. Speaking of the "light of natural reason" and the "light of faith", he encouraged believers to see the world as a rational structure, showing forth the finger print of order. For Thomas, faith and reason did not contradict each other, but complemented each other. Yes, there still was caprice, and mystery. But no one was called to live in the dark. God had put light in the window, people could seek the light.

Some centuries later, there would be this thing called "the Enlightenment" - during which there was an eruption of painting, and sculpture, and music and the arts. Poetry woke up; drama pranced onto the stage. Science took off - and telescopes looked into skies never seen before. Ships sailed from here to there, and new lands were discovered. And at the forefront of the progress was the Church as patron, pouring money and encouragement into the pot of the exploring, creative spirit. Admittedly, some interactions between church and science weren't all that friendly (Galileo Gallie). But this time of awakening feeds the pondering of whether faith, if it has function, might find the function being "shedding light at midnight".

Can faith shed light on who we are, and what life is for? Can keeping oil in the lamp serve the education of the spirit, the feeding of the heart, bringing a deeper understanding on how the peoples of the world can live together well? Is that faith's function?

In the parable, half the lamps, designed for a particular function, have no chance of fulfilling that function. God bless us, prompt us, that there may be oil in the lamp, for the giving of light.

Music for Reflection

Reflection Number Three

For contrast and context, I want to remember the great miracle story of the feeding of the five thousand. In Mark's gospel, it's told twice, and after the second telling, Jesus says to the disciples "do you still not understand?" I think this is meant to be a major anchoring principle for the "kingdom of God". The situation is that there are many people, and hardly any items of food. There is a pressing crisis of limited resources to which Jesus attends. He prays, he blesses, he unlocks what is available, and this great, brilliant act of sharing and providing and all being satisfied is enabled. The context is the need of the people - the hungry people. Jesus won't leave them hungry.

Here, in ***this*** parable, there also is a need, and limited resources to meet it. But in this case, it's not the need of the people. It's the need of the bridegroom to be welcomed. This is ***God's*** need. God is the one who might end up being hungry - hungry for welcome, or love, or celebration or light. Is God going to move heaven and earth to make sure that God is properly served? Or is ***this*** need going to be differently managed?

There is not enough oil for all ten lamps. So the usual negotiations begin: oi, you've got something we need, so give it to us (please?). Was there a "please"? None is recorded in the parable. Instead the mood is very much one of command: "give us your oil".

And in the world, some of these sorts of conversations soon erupt into war - when people who feel entitled to something decide just to seize it. We need petrol, we need diesel; we need water, we need power. (Actually, it's not so much we ***need*** petrol, as much as we ***want*** petrol, want diesel, want water, want power. Or maybe it's we ***demand*** petrol, demand diesel, demand water, demand power.)

In this parable, purporting to describe what the kingdom of God is like, the parties who demand oil from others, get pretty short shrift. Jesus feeds the hungry. A crisis of resources is met with five thousand fed. But when the foolish make demands, a point is made.

Half the lamps, designed for a particular function, have no chance of fulfilling that function. The making of demands doesn't attend to that. God bless us, prompt us, that there may be oil in the lamp, for the giving of light.

Reflection Number Four

There is something in this parable about the missed opportunity. Invited to be a bridesmaid at the great wedding of weddings! Such honour, such excitement,

such blessing. But because the opportunity is missed, we end up outside the door, banging on the door, blocked by the door. We should have thought about the oil. Spending the rest of life regretting that we didn't think about the oil. What if?!?! Who wants that?

2002. St George's, Takapuna. I finish the last little bit of my available study leave, working on a PhD thesis. My progress has been "slight", and it's becoming evident to me that for such a project, I need more time than what the church can offer me through provisions for study leave. I need either to give up, or to take some serious time away from ministry (a year) to get the job done. My wonderful Uncle David, some years earlier, on the basis of my School Certificate exam results, compared with my brother's School Certificate results, was inclined often to say at family functions "everyone knows that Andrew is the clever one". Indeed Andrew's PhD in law from Victoria taunted my Masters degree from Otago. It felt like unfinished business, but finishing it was going to require negotiation and sacrifice. When I graduated my parents were so proud. And I avoided living with a sense of lost opportunity, unfulfilled potential.

2010. Zhongshan, Guangdong, China. I am spending huge amounts of money on an Immigration advisor in Dunedin, trying to get a Philippino national a visa to spend enough time with me, the following year, to work out whether we loved each other. I wasn't confident that it would work. I just wanted to avoid spending the rest of my life wondering about whether I had missed an important opportunity. While he turned out not to be the one for me, I managed to avoid having to wonder my way through the "what ifs". Lost opportunity.

I don't think we are called to be super-ambitious, always pushing our way to the front of the queue (certainly not with a spirit of demand). I don't think we're called to be greedy. But we ***are*** called not to become drowsy. We're called to be alive to the God-possibilities, to be awake enough to enter the wedding celebration.

Half the lamps, designed for a particular function, have no chance of fulfilling that function. God bless us, prompt us, that there may be oil in the lamp, for the giving of light.

A moment of quiet.