

What Keeps Your Lamp Burning?

12 November, 2017

Reading: Matthew 25:1-12

I wonder if you are good at getting prepared. A friend of a friend of mine thought he was prepared. He was chaplain to a chapel royal in England. He got notification that none other than Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth herself was coming to worship. "She always likes a good sermon," her staff told him. No pressure there. So he got together what he thought was a pretty decent sermon. On the big day he arrived early got robed up and was getting ready when he suddenly realized that he had forgotten his reading glasses. Without them he would not be able to preach. Desperate, he went to the verger. "Look", he said, "I'm just popping home to get my reading glasses." "You can't," the verger said, "the Queen is due any minute. Look, don't worry, I have a draw full of glasses that people have left behind. One of them will do." So they rifled through the pile. One was just right. The Queen was by this time coming in the door. So the priest put the glasses in his robes and went to greet the royal party. The service went well. At the end, the Queen thanked him very much. "That was a lovely service today," she said, "and the sermon was so good." And, just as she was turning, said out the corner of her mouth, "Shame you had to look like Dame Edna Everage to deliver it."

Today we are given by Matthew a story of some people that aren't ready for their guest and some who are. It is known as the parable of the 10 bridesmaids. In some translations they are called the 10 foolish virgins. When the bridegroom arrived, as was the custom of the day, the wedding party would start. The bridesmaids had a simple job description: bring oil, light your lamps, have a party. For a reason that is not explained the bridegroom is late, seriously late. They fall asleep. Then the cry goes out "Look here he is. Get your lamps burning." Five have what it takes - oil, the other five try desperately to get oil off them.

There are many ways of interpreting this parable. That's the beauty of a parable. Like good art it not so much that we have the task of interpreting it, but rather that it interprets us.

We could look at how Christ is the bridegroom and we must be ready. But the question that stands out for me is: What keeps my lamp burning? What keeps our lamps burning?

What is it that sustains and refreshes us? What is it that gives us strength on the journey? What is it that gives us light in our dark times?

Last week we had an extraordinary meeting. A number of city councillors met with a few folk from our community here at St Peters. The mayor, having said how important St Peter's restoration is, had sent them off to meet with us and to find some money to help us. Like the foolish virgins I'd done very little to prepare except put my Singapore suit on and brush my teeth. But wonderful David Winfield and Fay Mangos had asked some folk from our wider St Peters family to attend: a young mum from mainly music and some from the English class. Ethan Wilson-Bruce, our excellent youth

worker, was here cleaning the loos so we roped him in too. All these people to impress upon the councillors what we do for the community.

One young woman shared how this community of St Peter's had been there for her when her husband died and how we had been there for her when she had started a new business offering her support, and the same thing when her baby came. Another spoke how they had been given, through the English class, new friends, new contacts. Someone else said how they had been given fresh start. And so it went on. If we had spent a year rehearsing, it couldn't have gone better. People spoke from the heart about what St Peter's meant to them. To quote one, "They are not a bunch of Bible bashers but real people making a real difference." The councillor's got it, it was hard not to. "I can see," said one of them to me afterwards "that this is a real hub of the community. You practice what you preach."

Since then the Dean has wanted to have coffee to discuss what we did at the meeting so he can get some of the magic too. The bishop has told him it was great. Strange, I can't remember the bishop even being there, but I guess she has eyes everywhere.

This is what fills my lamp. That, at the end of the day, we are making a difference for the better in our community. If ever my lamp gets a bit low, I think on that. This is a church that practices what it preaches. This is a caring community. I draw strength from the knowledge that we are doing what Jesus would have us do - being light and salt here in this corner of our city.

We stand on the verge of another church year. As we face the New Year, and Advent and Christmas, there is no better question to ask ourselves, than "What fills my lamp?" In the busyness and in the demands of life. I hope like me you can draw strength from this fellowship - from this community of faith.

Much is made in the church of the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ. Many arguments down through the ages about how this happens and when it happens, but something else is happening and it's really more important. Every time we gather, we ask the Spirit to make us the body of Christ, to transform us. We consume the body of Christ in order that we might become what we eat, the body of Christ.

If your lamp is burning a little low (and let's be honest, whose doesn't at times?) then this is how to fill it. Fill it at the well that never dries up, the well of God's love. We do that every time we gather. We do that every time we pray. Why not in prayer, ask Jesus your friend for the oil you need to sustain you in your life. Ask Jesus to fill your lamp.

The best preparation for life is to be filled with the love of God.