

Sermon preached by Rev Rachel McDougall

St Paul's Canterbury

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Being Prepared: living with uncertainty in hope, love for God.

Being prepared for what life throws up at us is a challenge.

I wasn't prepared for this week of uncertainty in the wake of the US election.

None of us felt prepared for this year of COVID, yet we have adapted.

What a topsy turvy world we live in!

Perhaps this gives us a sense of what it was like for Matthew and his community hearing these words of Jesus in the wake of the temple in Jerusalem being destroyed and Jesus' return being delayed.

They lived with uncertainty.

Jesus' own disciples also knew uncertainty as they felt the tension rising amid the conflicts and Jesus' warnings about his imminent death.

Like most Jews they expected and looked forward to the end of the age and God coming to reign in full over the forces railed against them. So the disciples have asked for signs of the coming age.

This is the context for this difficult parable that Jesus tells about what the kingdom of heaven is like.

There are difficult elements in this parable.

Partly this is due to the wedding customs of the time where celebrations might be delayed whilst negotiations about the wedding took place.

We have five foolish and five wise bridesmaids.

All of them fall asleep whilst waiting.

The difference between them is that the foolish do not take extra flasks of oil with them. The wise were prepared for the wait.

There's the failure of the wise to help the foolish, the shop that wouldn't be open at midnight and the harshness of the shut door and 'I do not know you' from the bridegroom.

It seems to sit uneasily with other passages talking about generosity and grace and forgiveness.

For me, the centre of the story seems to be around the extra flasks of oil and on those who were ready for the celebration.

The words at the end which are translated keep awake might be better understood as be prepared.

What does it mean to be prepared and ready for the big joyous party of God's coming?

What does it mean to have enough oil for our lamps for the in between?

We often think of lamps as being tiny pottery ones, but they are more likely to be large torches that could withstand the wind and be bright enough to light the way between one house and another.

Even more reason to carry more oil.

What does it mean to be prepared with enough oil?

People have often understood the oil as being about how we live out our faith – how our lives bear the light of faith in what we do and who we are.

It is easy to hear this as you should do good works and work hard, but I don't think this is about sheer effort.

Perhaps it is about the oil that enables our lives of faith to grow and flourish and reveal love.

What is it that helps oil the wheels of your faith?

It's certainly easy for them to get squeaky at times and be more like the foolish bridesmaid than the wise one!

I think this reading has something to say about how we persevere in the life of faith in uncertain times.

It asks us to consider what oils the wheels of endurance and perseverance?

During this year of 2020 I know how much more I am being drawn to pray and read, to be nourished and sustained by God through difficult times and to continue to trust in God's grace.

The other question I've been reflecting on is how the good oil of God's love is reflected out to others.

Is my faith more than an escape from the difficulties of living in our world?

Or is it one that immerses me in the world and to respond lovingly and generously and helps me to live in it?

I am reminded of the former President Jimmy Carter who at the age of 96 is still helping build homes for people who are homeless. He says that we should live our lives as though Christ was coming this afternoon.

So perhaps being prepared is about being ready to shine with love, justice and hope where we are and to remain faithful and persisting come what may. It is about being hopeful and bearing the torch of love and kindness where we are.

One light that seemed to shine from the election chaos of the States is Cori Bush's acceptance speech of hope as the first African American representative from Missouri to Congress.

She said: 'If you know nothing else: Your congress woman elect loves you. If I love you I care that you eat, if I love you I care that you have shelter and adequate safe housing... and have a dignity and a quality of life... we will beat the challenges of this moment, as a movement, side by side... ready to serve each other until every single one of us is free.'

That seems to me to be oil burning brightly of God's love.

Amen.

Lections:
Joshua 24. 1-3a, 14-25
Psalms 78.1-7
Matthew 25.1-13