

Sermon for 12TH Nov 2023 - The Text: Matthew 25:1-13

A famous teacher of the church once said: There are only two types of people in the world – fools who think they are wise, and the wise who know they are fools. What he meant was that the first step towards true godly wisdom is to know you are not wise, for there is always more to learn along the journey of faith. A person who thinks they have no more to learn is the person who still has a great deal more to learn.

In the Scriptures, to be wise does not necessarily mean having a head full of facts and figures. To be wise is not necessarily to be smart. The smart are not always wise, especially when it comes to the things of God; and the wise are not always smart, particularly when it comes to the things of this world.

In an earlier parable, Jesus describes the wise as those who build the house of their faith on the Rock (that is, on himself). He says that the wise are those who not only hear the word of God but also do it; that is, live it out in their daily lives. The fools, on the other hand, though they may hear the word of God, don't do it; don't live according to it. Instead they build their houses on the shifting sands of personal desires, opinion, culture, fashion.

Notice in the parable that both the wise and the foolish virgins are waiting for the Bridegroom. In other words, this is not a parable about believers and unbelievers, but about two different types of believers. The wise are wise because they have prepared for every contingency by keeping their lamps filled with oil. The foolish, on the other hand, presume that they have enough oil to get them through to the end. In this parable, oil is faith. The wise keep their faith continually replenished. The foolish think the faith they have now is sufficient until Christ returns.

It is only when the point of crisis comes – the delay of the bridegroom – that they two groups are finally distinguished. Just as the two groups of builders are distinguished only when the storm comes. So, what are we to do? Well first we are to recognise that we cannot manufacture our own oil. Faith is not something we work up in ourselves; it is God's gift that we keep on receiving from him through the means that he has provided. That's why true disciples are those who continue in Jesus' Word. This means not only reading and hearing it but also doing it, for that is faith's purpose – to shine with the light of Christ, just as the oil's purpose is to allow the lamp to stay lit.

Wisdom, therefore, is both knowing and doing. Not only does it keep faith replenished and thus prepared for any eventuality, but it also maintains one's spiritual health. The story is told of someone talking to an old school friend who was telling him about his mother who is dying of emphysema. He said that she now has to be hooked up to an oxygen tank for 15 hours a day, and that the doctors have given her little time left. But the really sad part of the story is that in spite of this, she still chain-smokes more than a packet of cigarettes a day, removing her mask to take another drag. Now that is foolish – not only because she knows better, but also because she is knowingly continuing in the very behaviour that has made her so sick in the first place.

We do the same in a spiritual sense when we continue in a sin, fully knowing that it is wrong and that by continuing in it we are hurting ourselves (and others) and endangering our faith. I think we all have experienced such folly. We all know the lack of peace, the joylessness, the regret, the shame, the hiding and the self-deception and the self-loathing that comes on the heels of committing a deliberate sin. And we know who it is that we abandon when we do so; for sin is not just a 'no' to God's law but to God himself, who is love, and the secret of joy.

That is why true wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord, with the wisdom of repentance; of knowing what to do and what to leave behind. Presbyterian minister, Frederick Speakman, tells the story of shaking hands at the door one Sunday when the service was over. As he came back down the aisle on the church after everyone had left, he noticed that some things had been left behind. A bulletin with a shopping list in the margins. In this pew, a pair of gloves; in the next, a pencil on the floor and a lolly wrapper on the seat. As he reached the altar he looked once more at the empty sanctuary and thought to himself, "I wonder what else has been left behind."

Wouldn't it be every pastor's dream to come down the aisle after worship and find other items there. You know, in this pew someone's deep grief; there, another's bitter disappointment or sense of failure. In another section some secret sin, real or imagined, not all that important now it had been discarded. Further on, the bulkier rubbish of a badly bruised ego, or the remains of a heated argument on the way to church; or a deep, longstanding resentment between members. Anger, guilt, hurt – all this stuff that so easily beats us up and burns the oil of faith out of us – all swept up and thrown out with the rest of the leftover trash. For it is forgiveness that both replenishes our spiritual resources and greases the community of faith. "Received forgiveness – God's grace as a renewable resource," Speakman whispered to himself, "that's the only thing that keeps us going, keeps our lamps burning."

In many ways life uses us up; we get burnt out and depleted. But the message of the gospel is that there is also the possibility of replenishment. Drained, we can be refilled as we continue to draw our life from God through the forgiveness of sins. So, if you feel the flame of your faith burning low, then listen again to words the prophet Isaiah wrote so long ago, "a bruised reed [the Lord] will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." Remember: the folly of the foolish was not that they didn't believe that the Bridegroom was coming; it's that they figured had enough oil to last, that they could do it on their own, without God's ongoing help. But they couldn't and we can't, and it is wisdom to realise that.

Meanwhile, we wait for the Lord, and as we wait, we have the option either to stay prepared, or not. It is up to us. So let us be and remain prepared by replenishing our faith through prayer and God's word and shining Christ's light to others through our heartfelt works of love and Christian example. And don't worry that you will get burned out; for Jesus not only gave himself for us on the cross, but he gives himself to us at every step of the journey. **"Ask, and you shall receive."** That is his promise to each of us. Ask, and you will find that there is rest and replenishment! There is forgiveness. There is hope. And the wise still trim their lamps with the oil of his grace. In the name of Jesus. Amen.