

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost; Remembrance Sunday; rcl yr a, 2020
St. John's in person and at home
Joshua 24:1-3A, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

But the wise replied, 'No! There will not be enough for you and for us'

This is, without a doubt, one of the harder sayings in Scripture: “But the wise replied, ‘No! There will not be enough for you and for us.’” It comes from the parable we just heard, the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids.

As the parable goes, ten bridesmaids take their lamps, and wait for the bridegroom. But only five are ready for the long night ahead. The other five bridesmaids run out of oil for their lamps, and while the foolish are out shopping for more oil the well-awaited groom returns. Only the five wise bridesmaids—the ones prepared enough to *not* be out of the house when the groom arrives—only these five wise bridesmaids get to go to the wedding banquet.

The other five, the foolish bridesmaids, the ones who weren't prepared to have enough oil on hand, do not get an invitation, and they are locked out of the big party.

This may already feel a bit troublesome: the haves are welcomed in, the have-nots appear to be left out. But it's the middle bit that is even more troublesome. The wise don't even share the oil they have with the foolish. The foolish bridesmaids ask, even, for the wise bridesmaids to share: “The foolish say to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'”

“But the wise replied, 'No! There will not be enough for you and for us.’”

So the haves don't share with the have-nots. And the have-nots, in the end, have even less; the haves get a wedding banquet, and the have-nots are locked out, hungry, in the dark, and forgotten. And it seems the gospel of compassion has been turned on its head.

So there's something of a scandal at the heart of this parable. There just isn't enough oil, it seems, to go 'round. But this, though, helps us understand what this parable is *not* about. This parable is *not* about abundance and scarcity.

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It cannot be about grace, for one: God's grace is without end, poured out for us most generously. Nor is it about political economy and the distribution of goods. Because we know that there *is* enough to go around when it comes to food and to wealth. If this were a parable about political economy and the distribution of goods, it would most certainly be the so-called "wise bridesmaids" who would be locked out of the banquet—for the unjust, and unnecessary, hoarding of wealth and sustenance.

Nevertheless, in this parable, it is clear that there is, indeed, not enough oil to go 'round. There is no miracle of abundance, in this parable, if only we were to share with faith the little we have. This parable tells us of no divine intervention, no *miraculous* abundance of oil. And what we are stuck with is an intransigent reality in this parable: the *wise* bridesmaids have indeed done the right thing.

Part of the scandal we feel in the wise bridesmaids refraining from giving away their oil is that the wise bridesmaids seem to be entirely without *compassion*. But is not compassion the *hallmark* of being Christian? What are we, if we aren't compassionate?

Remembrance Sunday is quite a fitting day to have this parable, at least in one sense: it helps us see that there are times when compassion simply cannot be our *primary* moral concern.

If there is a season for war, may it be irregularly observed, and with many many many long seasons in between. May we never enter into war lightly. And along with someone like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who considered himself a pacifist his whole life—up to and including the time when we was a part of a plot to assassinate Hitler—may we remember that going to war may well put our own souls at stake, and is by definition something other than the norm for Christian behaviour.

But in a time of war, compassion necessarily becomes secondary, if it interferes with other necessary moral commitments. Moral commitments like the protection of the innocent from harm. Moral commitments like peace—peace being the only true end of war.

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If compassion prevents us from protecting the innocent, or if compassion prevents us from seeking peace—compassion can no longer be a *primary* moral commitment.

We have an even more salient example of this in a time of political transition in the time of Trump: compassion towards Trump cannot lead us to leave him in the White House come January. There are other more pressing moral concerns—not least a democratic process that has decided against him—than simple compassion towards Trump, in this political moment.

And so the five wise bridesmaids, as scandalous as it first appears, do not put compassion first. To be compassionate would have meant, in the economy of this parable, no bridesmaids left at all to hear the call of the bridegroom. And so it is with in the life of our communities: sometimes our commitment to compassion cannot be a *primary* moral commitment.

Sometimes justice, and the protection of the vulnerable, is more important than compassion. Sometimes peace, sought sometimes through coercive means, is more important than compassion. This will, we pray, never be the norm; but it does have its occasion.

But even in the times when justice and the protection of the vulnerable is a primary moral concern, or peace is a primary moral concern, it doesn't mean that we would be entirely *without* compassion. We would most certainly be most Christian, if, even as we seek to protect the innocent and vulnerable from harm, even as we seek peace with spiritually dangerous coercion and force, that we would remember that it remains for some of us now, and others in good time, to pray for unjust actors, to pray for enemies, and to have compassion on them in this way. To pray for their conversion, in hope.

One of the ways that we can make sense of this sort of parable is to read it, and understand it, as something enclosed around a greater good, a greater hope, and a greater promise. Our experience of God's goodness comes to us in a fragmented way. But where we would see distinctions between compassion, justice, and peace—and where we would need to act according to those distinctions—there is no such distinction in God.

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The Lord our God is one.

So even as this parable ends with a wedding banquet for some, but loneliness for others; even as this parable ends with a Lord that appears to exact judgment, we live in the hope and confidence that even this exclusion would be but for a time, but for a season. We live in the hope and confidence that the the mercy of the Lord would eventually win the day, and that all of us together: insider and outsider, wise and foolish, included and excluded, would *ultimately* be caught up in the light that burns away our sin, drawn up into a relentless and sanctifying grace, and brought into the embrace of the one in whom compassion, justice, and peace dwell together without distinction: into the life of the Lord our God, the Lord who is one.
AMEN.

The Revd Dr Preston DS Parsons