

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, 6/11/2011, Holy Trinity

Matthew 25:1-13

This morning's Gospel reading is another of the parables from Matthew's Gospel that lead us down a number of side tracks as we try to find the main theme and point of the parable.

We have the image of a wedding in which ten young girls are to greet the bridegroom when he comes.

Only five of the girls took extra oil for their lamps so that when the bridegroom arrives their lamps would burn brightly.

This presents a problem.

Is the story simply a lesson in being prepared?

Then there is the oil.

Should the five prepared girls have given some of their oil to the ones who had none?

Is the story simply a lesson about sharing?

In any case, where would they find a shop open at midnight in which they could buy more oil?

Hence we have another problem.

Finally, the bridegroom arrives.

There is great rejoicing.

The guests and the five young girls with their lamps burning enter the banquet hall and the doors are closed.

When the other five girls arrive they are not admitted because the host claims that he does not know them.

How could this happen? Surely they were girls from the village and would be known as friends of the bride and groom.

This presents us with another problem.

At least one biblical scholar that I read suggested that we should not press the fine detail for answers.

This seems to be another situation in which Matthew re-writes something Jesus may have said and uses it for his own purpose.

What, then, is the purpose for which Matthew writes this story?

Once more we look at what is happening in Matthew's world at the time of writing.

Last week's Gospel reading gave us Jesus' prediction of the devastation of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple which we know had happened by the time Matthew's Gospel was written.

He is also writing for the fledgling church which included some gentiles as well as Jews who had converted to Christianity.

Last week's reading ended with warnings to church leaders to be faithful servants; otherwise they would experience the same fate as the hypocrites.

It was also a time for the persecution of Christians under Nero.

So the point of this writing is readiness.

It is a warning to be prepared.

It is about sustaining the life of faith.

The initial enthusiasm for the Christian faith and life is shown in the initial bright light from the burning oil but there is no guarantee that the light will burn in the future.

I am sure that we have seen that initial enthusiasm fade with time in the lives of others and even in our own lives.

Matthew tells the story to enable people to live in a relationship with God that has a continuing significance in living our life in Christ.

That relationship with God is built on love, the love of God for us, our love for God, our love for our neighbour and our love for oneself.

How significant is the oil in all of this! The oil signifies the anointing of the Spirit on us.

The Spirit brings love. We walk in the Spirit and we show the gifts of the Spirit in our continuing lives.

Once more Matthew brings us down to earth with his warning to be prepared, to be ready.

This is our daily challenge to continue our relationship with God, to walk in the Spirit, showing love and the other gifts of the Spirit in our lives.

Renew that burning love for God and for sharing the good news of salvation with others around us.

Our constant prayer, then, needs to be a daily prayer for renewal.