

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 32 Year A 2020

A few years ago, I had the joy of travelling to Cambridge to spend a couple of days in that magnificent University city. A visit to the famous Kings College was of course on the list of things to do. Really, it is one of treasures of the Anglican world: its fine chapel with magnificent stone vaulted ceiling; its internationally renowned choir, loved the world over for its annual broadcast of Nine Lesson and Carols. In normal times the choir sings the liturgy day in and day out. Being there on a Wednesday night there was no Evensong, but a choral Eucharist instead. There was quite a queue to get into the chapel. And it meant being in the stalls for quite some time before the service began. Behind me sat a woman with a friend who proceeded for the best part of an hour to talk incessantly. And this in a place which lends itself to awe and quiet wonder! On and on it went. The people about me, no doubt from all parts of the globe, became restless at this intrusion. Eventually, I turned around, and said quite curtly, to my shame, 'Do you think you could be quiet now.' Shocked, she blurted out how her son sang in the choir, how she was part of her church back home. I said, 'we are here for the Eucharist, and some of us would like to pray.' She was quiet then. Those around me nodded in appreciation.

Now, I am the first to admit we all have, myself included, lapses in concentration, times when we do not approach the sacrament with the degree of awe and recollection that *should* accompany us as we approach the altar. We all have times when we come to church and take our seats without the wonder that ought to be in our hearts as we ponder and prepare for the great mystery to be celebrated. Perhaps that pressure has been even greater these past months when most of us have been removed from the usual supports and habits which help foster interior recollection. The dear faithful who have maintained the practice of the faith away from church have had to carve out a sense of the sacred in your very homes. But whether in person or remotely on-line we should never approach the sacrament of our redemption casually, carelessly or indifferently. As catholic Christians we assert that what happens here at the altar *is* special, that here we meet the bridegroom and that we ought meet him humbly and reverently.

None of us, of course, can - or should - peer into the souls of other believers. But all too often in churches we can detect an attitude which says, 'why should I care about what goes on up there, why be quiet, prayerful, prepared? Why show reverence? Why bother with it at all?' We see this attitude lived out by a refusal to appropriately acknowledging the altar with a bow or the tabernacle with a genuflection. We see it in consistently being late to church, chattering right until the bell before mass rings, and in some places, walking into morning mass with a takeaway latte. In the context we now live, a slowness and reluctance to return to church. But if that is the attitude this may be the sign, in the terms of the gospel today, to check the level of the oil in our lamps.

Now, the casualness of attitude when approaching our Lord in the holy sacrament of the altar can come from any number of things: never being properly instructed, boredom, an overfamiliarly, distraction, ill-discipline. But it also reveals something of a loss of conviction, a loss of the first joy in believing, indeed, a loss of faith. Recent research from the UK reveals that 2% of Anglican clergy in England do not hold to any belief in God – that they are, for all intents and purposes, atheists. Now, one might think with some of the nonsense that comes out of the Church of England that it was *only* 2%. But really, you would have to admit that belief in God is kind of a minimum standard for holding the office and receiving the stipend of a priest in the church of God. Clearly, some have no such scruples.

What *would* a priest say at a funeral if he didn't believe in God? How would he, week by week, celebrate the sacraments of the church with any kind of integrity without belief in God? How could he approach our foundational document - the bible - without belief in God? It really is a chilling prospect. And it must have an impact, it must shape congregations. Some might relish the idea that their community was so cutting edge they could dispense with all that old-fashioned mumbo jumbo. The light might well go out for the pastor, for the shepherd but by consequence, it will for the flock as well. And who would refill their lamps? This is perhaps an extreme. We give thanks to God that most people in our churches *are* sincere in their faith. And despite all our many failings and foibles, its shepherds also, try their best.

At various points in the lives of us all, the lamp of faith flickers and wavers. This is why it is so important – crucial in fact – to stay close to those sources which will nourish, support, encourage and build faith. We all know how this has been stretched and strained in unforeseen ways this past year. And without doubt the oil in the lamps of many of us has run very low indeed. This time of separation should have reminded us all that we are the body of Christ, that the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith. To be deprived of it is a loss. And the longer we permit ourselves to be separated from both then the lamp of faith will grow faint and cold. We are being offered – now – the chance to come, for our lamps to be refilled. So not be slow to do so!

Now, the parable we encounter today reminds us of the expectation in the infant church that the Lord Christ would return soon, and of disappointment when he did not return as soon as was expected; and so a rethinking about the church's life, its role and identity as it settled into the long haul. The parable Matthew places before us today speaks directly to this situation. And so the parable is often read as a lesson in prudence, to not be caught unawares, to not become casual and complacent in faith.

But more than this, the parable reminds us we carry a light. *You are the light of the world*, we are told earlier in this gospel. Even in the time of test and trial, even in the time of isolation and deprivation, even in the time of waiting and uncertainty, the light of faith is still meant to burn! They are not reasons - much less excuses! – to let the oil run dry. Trouble and stress *are* part of our lives. It is part of the life of the church! This shouldn't surprise us. We follow Christ crucified whose own loss and failure is at the centre of faith. But this must always of course be put into the perspective of resurrection faith, and in the faith of Christ's ultimate victory over all things, even victory over the stresses and strains we now face. We serve Christ crucified, yes. But also the Glorified One, who calls us in hope. We might feel keenly this time of trial. It might seem to us to be a time of absence. But, my brothers and sisters, our Lord Christ hasn't gone anywhere! He remains Emmanuel! And he is waiting for you to return to him, to the graces of the sacraments, to the community of his church. He is waiting for you to come to him to fill the lamp of faith. Amen.