## Reflection: The “New” Oil

I looked at the lectionary to see what the Gospel reading was for today and Linda was there and asked me what it was. I won’t say exactly what I replied but I can say it amounted to “Oh dear what a shame! It’s those 10 wise and foolish virgins”

This is not an easy passage to have to talk about because it doesn’t describe what is real in my life.

The first is that it doesn’t aim to convey a message in the way that I related to; which is encouragement. It’s like an old fashioned rather nasty teacher threatening a class to be good while he is out of the room. It is saying “keep the faith” or else because there will be a day of reckoning when you least expect it.

It isn’t like most of Jesus’ parables. Jesus’ parables are usually about everyday events that his audience could easily relate to. His parables usually had an edge to them that as you thought about what he said it would challenge attitudes that you might take for granted. I can’t see any challenge in this one. It just says in effect that if your light is still burning when the day of judgement comes, then you will be let into heaven, if not then the door is closed to you. You get what you deserve in a pretty harsh black and white way.

I set a lot of store by the work of the Jesus’ Seminar, that body of scholars including our Lloyd Geering. The Jesus Seminar says that it is unlikely that Jesus actually did speak this parable. They say it just doesn’t sound like him in effect. I am very pleased about that for I wouldn’t like to think that Jesus would be like that.

The second reason is a continuation of that negativity. I suspect from what I have read about Matthew’s Gospel that he was writing for Jewish people and was very hurt because the Jewish religious leaders by and large did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. I think that attitude reveals itself most clearly when Matthew has the Jewish crowd saying to Pilate “Smear his blood upon us and our children” when they shouted for Jesus to be crucified. Matthew also emphasised the end times and a coming judgement.

However there is an inescapable truth in what Matthew is saying. The idea of a coming judgement is staring us in the face. We have heard it over and over again; Al Gore and his “Inconvenient Truth”, David Attenborough making programmes about extinction of species. All the many destructive results of too many humans doing too much harm to the ecosystems. There are lots of other possible judgements. How will we cope when the next pandemic hits us, and for some reason I can’t understand, our government can’t print a whole lot more money to get us through it?  What will happen to our communities when we continue to fail to lift children out of poverty and even out inequality.

I don’t need to go on for there are other days of judgement looming there, and that’s just the ones we can anticipate, and how we cope will depend on humanity’s life-styles. It is all too obvious that humanity can act like those wise or foolish maidens and the outcome could well be as good or bad for us as those girls in the parable. Those threats can’t be sugar-coated, the consequences of us failing to do what we should will be as automatic as the closed door that met the girls who didn’t have their lights burning.

So I am with Matthew on this, but enough of saying the obvious.

Matthew using the example of ten maidens waiting outside a wedding feast to be invited in raises an issue for me.

It conjures up an image of those ten girls being treated as second-rate people. They are kept outside until the bridegroom chooses to arrive. I presume their function when they got inside was to provide entertainment for middle-aged half-drunk men.

The world we live in, in countries like ours anyway is not one that is run any longer by middle aged and older men.

For most of human history from what we know it has been run by we men. But not any longer. I have illustrated that by the picture of some women leaders on the cover of the order of service. I prepared that a couple of weeks ago, in the light of recent events I could have included Nanaia Mahuta, Chloe Swarbrick and Ayesha Verrell.

I read some weeks ago that the countries that were doing best with dealing with Covid 19 were run by women. As a generalisation it does seem that the sort of men who often get into positions of power do not have the qualities that are necessary in the present world.

I go to Living Wage meetings. As you would expect I am usually the oldest person there, and can’t hear much of what is said, and I feel I am a bit of a benign and somewhat amusing old fossil. But it is nearly all women, and not only do they very warmly accept me, but the ideas and lots of energy comes from young women in particular.  Where it matters, it seems to me that we men now have to accept that leadership roles are not determined by gender

Countries like ours are increasingly giving everyone equal opportunity regardless of race, age or gender. As we all know there is still some way to go but at least the assumption that white middle-aged males have an edge over other humans is losing support.

We are having our AGM in a few minutes. I enjoy being a member of this parish, I feel supported here. I think you would all agree that this parish works pretty well otherwise we wouldn’t be here. I will sit down there and no longer be expected to say anything which I will be very happy about. I will notice that most of the reports will be given by women, most of Parish Council are women. There will be at least two women at the table at the front, and our two previous two ministers were women.

Women are taking up leadership positions, they are no longer treated like the ten young women in this parable. But it isn’t a case of women displacing men and relegating us to being compliant and inoffensive helpers in the background.

I experienced the real modern world a few weeks ago when door-knocking for the Green Party around a bit of the Mount Cook area. Two of us went out together to do it. I’ll give my partner the name Freddie. Freddie would have been somewhere between 20 and 30 and as we chatted she told me she was bisexual. I am using the pronoun “she” because I saw her that way, but we worked together well and I think enjoyed each-other’s company.

In today’s world, increasingly gender and in this case age didn’t matter, though she was a bit quicker up long flights of steps than me. We all have our particular strengths and thankfully women are increasingly being able to use them and we are a whole lot better for it.

A society that works best values kindness and values such as compassion as the mother of our nation told us and showed us following the March 15th massacre at the Christchurch mosque.

Those values are not the exclusive property of women. I will take my life in my hands saying that not all women actually seem to exhibit them. But it is quite possible, and always has been, for we men to act kindly and sensitively. Our quote that we had just now is up in Civic Square where it says “be kind for whenever kindness becomes part of something it beautifies it”. According to someone called Muhammad al-Bukhari a ninth century Persian scholar that’s a quote from the prophet Mohammed.

It is the values we live by that matter, not our gender or other ways the world can judge people's worth by, like religion for example.

I have taken some exception with Matthew’s parable because I live in a very different world than he did and have had very different experiences of life.

But what it has shown me is that I agree that this world is rational and humanity really will succeed or fail depending on how we live and act.

However we now know a better way than the norms of the society in which Matthew lived, for the better way is for all to be equally valued regardless of gender, race, colour of our skin or level of education or status.

My final comment is to put my meaning on the oil that the young women’s lights needed. I suggest that the values like kindness, compassion, love, generosity of spirit are really the oil for the light that humanity needs in order to enter the good future represented by the wedding feast in Matthew. When we look at some of the new leaders we have, regardless of gender, the attitudes increasingly being adopted by them and their societies represent a timely oil change that is necessary to equip us to cope with the challenges of the future.

By the way I put the new in the title of this service in inverted commas because it isn’t a new concept. The quotes from beyond the Christian tradition were from Lao Tzu who is a mythical character who maybe lived in the 6th century BCE and also from Muhammed.

I didn’t put Margie Mayman and Susan Jones in the picture on the order of service as that would have made ten and I didn’t want you to wonder the obvious.