

The Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX

8 November 2020

There is a street in the city of Westminster that connects Buckingham Palace to the west to Trafalgar Square to the east. They call this stretch of street, "The Mall." On our last day in London, our 13-year old and I decided to go see the changing of the guard. We arrived around 1:00pm to the Palace only to learn that they only changed the guard now at 10:00am, having eliminated the 4:00pm changing for budgetary reasons. We were quite upset and began to make our way back to Trafalgar Square. At the end of our first block we came to a traffic light and stood behind a group of six men. Four men were forming a periphery around the other two who were busy in conversation. People on both sides of the street were taking pictures, but my daughter and I were clueless about who the men might be. It was only after the light changed and the group crossed the street that a man behind us said, "I have been in England for 35 years and this is the first time I have seen Prince Charles in Person." Of course, I tried to take my camera out but, by then, the group was out of reach. So, I want all of you to know that I know Prince Charles. I stood right behind him at The Mall. He was wearing a grey charcoal suit.

Today we have a similar situation: 10 virgins, bridesmaids, young-women... are given the task to wait for the bridegroom whom they know, so they may use their light to lead him into the wedding banquet. We don't really know who they are: servants, family members, friends of the family, etc. Their job is simple: Wait for the bridegroom, light his way to the party, and join the celebration with him at the wedding reception. We are told that all 10 have fallen asleep, but, when the sound came that the bridegroom was arriving, five were able to take their posts, while five are forced to go into the market to purchase more oil. When they return, the guests are inside celebrating, and the door is shut.

Since they all know the bridegroom, they knock expecting to be allowed in. To their surprise, the groom says, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." They are not allowed in and miss the opportunity to join the celebration. We have seen this image before. In Chapter 7:21-23, Matthew presents us a similar parable, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'"

We have the same expression in our passage today. The bridegroom says, "Truly I tell you, I don't know you." The emphasis in both passages is about knowing and being known by the groom. I can say I know Prince Charles, but it would be very strange if I knock on Buckingham Palace and say, "Charles, let me in. Remember I saw you at The Mall. I stood right behind you. You were wearing a charcoal gray suit." How do you think this would work? I tell you what would happen. Within a few seconds I would get to know rather intimately a few well-

armed security officers. It would be like any of us pretending we have a relationship with the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Pope, just because we have their picture on our mantle place and may have actually seen them once or twice.

Matthew today wants us to be prepared, so we don't lose the chance to join the groom. The question is how? How do we prepare to meet the groom when he comes. How can we make sure we are invited in? The text today gives us a clear answer. We must have "Enough Oil." But what does this mean exactly? Olive Oil was used for fuel for lamps and as long as you had it, you would be able to break the darkness of night and see your way in and out of potentially dangerous places. In Biblical language darkness is terrifying. Danger lurks in darkness, as evil is often hatched in shadows. Matthew's answer is to have enough oil to be able to see our way in case the groom arrives at night. Be ready and be prepared because we don't know the day or the hour.

The passage today then asks two questions: "When will Messiah return?" and "How do we wait, or, rather, what do we do while we wait?" Scripture is clear that the answer of the first question, "When will the groom come?" is simple, "We don't know." He will come as a thief in the night, when we least expect him, at the appointed hour, etc. We simply don't know and we have no way to figure it out. Many have pretended to know when he was coming and some have even led their disciples to suicide, thinking they were joining the Messiah at the tip of the Haley Comet. We simply don't know, and if anyone presumes to be able to tell you when Messiah will come, run for the hills and avoid that person forever!

The answer to the second question, "What do we do while we wait?" is given to us today by the passage. We must get enough oil. But, what does oil represent here? Some have argued that it represents faith, and I agree to a certain degree, but, I am often uncomfortable with the idea that faith is the ultimate goal to the point that faith becomes the thing. Also the passage contradicts this idea. We can say that because they knew the bridegroom, the five maids had faith they would be let in, and yet, they were not. Their faith only carried them so far. Yes, we are saved by faith, but our faith does not create our salvation. Our faith simply accepts what another has done for us. It is what the Lord has done for us that saves us. Our faith comes after the act of salvation and not before. We don't have faith in our faith. We have faith in Jesus of Nazareth. It is him and what he has done that procures our salvation. Our faith is an instrument, a conduit, a highway that leads us to salvation, but it is Christ himself who IS our salvation. Faith is not the thing!

Some say it is our good works that save us, and there is some truth in this passage about this. But, once again, this is an incomplete answer. How can good works be the oil? Remember that these maids were fully engaged in the work of waiting. In the earlier passage, the men who come looking to get accepted had prophesied, healed, even expelled demons in the Lord's name. They had spent a lifetime doing good works and yet, they were not allowed in. If the oil is good works then how can those people who are unable to do good works be saved? How can infants, the very elderly, those incapacitated are to be saved if it is about them?

What is this oil and how do we get it? The passage itself gives us the answer. In both the passage from Matthew 7 and this passage for today the Lord says, "I don't know you!" This is the key. Not so much that we know Jesus, but that Jesus knows us. I have a story to illustrate this. When the pope first went to Argentina he was seen by thousands of people who had attended his masses when he was a priest, who had been in his Diocese when he was a Bishop, and who had known his family for generations. But, the fact that they knew him did not give any of them the right to join him in his popemobile. But, as the popemobile was driving down a busy street, with thousands of people lined on both sides of the street screaming, waving, praying, and crossing themselves, the pope saw a classmate from seminary and ordered the popemobile to stop. He came down, walked to his friend, gave him a hug, and invited him to join him, to the chagrin of his security forces. The point here is not that the millions of people on that busy street knew the pope. The point was that the pope knew and had a relationship with that one man.

The oil represents neither faith alone, nor works alone, but rather our relationship with Jesus of Nazareth. It is this relationship that fuels our lives and produces the light we need. This relationship chases away the darkness of ignorance, self-sufficiency, and presumptuousness. This relationship is the invisible current in our lives, and even when we don't see it, it gives us the power to fill our lives with light. As long as we are plugged in into that relationship as a lamp is plugged in to a power source, we will have the radiance of his light. The key is not that we know Jesus, the answer is to be known by Jesus.

The good news is that we don't need spectacular works to be known by Jesus. We don't have to run to the mountains to pray for the rest of our lives. We don't have to abandon everything to join the mission fields in Africa or India, and we don't have to be consumed with the idea of good works. All we need to do is the work God has given us to do here and now. To be fully present in the moment. To lead our lives with integrity and hope. To have faith in what he has already done for us. To love and serve others out of gratitude for that free gift of salvation. To pray and to love. What we need is what the Italians call "Innamoramento" or the process of falling in love. We need to fall in love with Jesus all over again. When you love someone with body, heart, and soul, you look forward to doing the things that please that person. You look forward to serving and spending time with that person. You try hard to love the people that are important to that person. You would do whatever you need to do to get to know and to be known intimately and deeply by that person. There is nothing more empowering than love. Love is the oil. It's all about a relationship with our Savior.

Today we celebrate the baptism of Robert James Stewart and we pray that he may grow to have a deep and profound relationship with Jesus. We pray that he and us may be known by Jesus so deeply and so profoundly that our lives may be filled with power and light. Amen!