

# The good oil that fuels love and justice

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 12 November 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Pentecost 23A

**Amos 5:18-24; Matthew 25: 1-13; Contemporary Reading:  
“To say I love you” by Carter Heyward in *Our Passion for Justice***

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Reflections” tab

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It's been a long week in politics and, for many of us, in personal life. The news from Manus Island of desperate men cast adrift by the Australian government is haunting. Since the announcement of the marriage postal survey, I've gone back to Twitter, which I had ignored happily for a year or more. I follow Lyle Shelton just to keep track of what he's up to - though I have to admit that the Coalition for Marriage parody account is far more enlightening and amusing. It's been a long week as the deadline for the survey return passed and we wait until Wednesday to hear the results.

On Twitter, I also follow Behrouz Boochani, one of the 580 men on Manus Island, a former journalist who tweets relentlessly about danger, about 40 degree heat and humidity, about lack of water and electricity, lack of health care for a man with untreated kidney stones and another with a heart condition.

Through Behrouz Boochani's tweets, I follow the news that is not reported on the news. Squalid living conditions and the desperate measures taken to survive. But also the news of Australian people who are engaging in every imaginable political action to beg the government to change course. It's been a long week in hell on Manus as the refugees have refused to leave the closed centre for fear of violence. It's been a long week looking at and listening to evil as LNP politicians justify inhumanity and ALP politicians justify collusion.

It's been a week of waiting. And the reading that we heard this morning from Matthew's Gospel is about waiting - and about being prepared - prepared for the waiting, not just for the one who will come. People who know me probably know that I am possibly the world's worst person to be preaching on being prepared! But it's the task I have to do.

This parable, about the wise and foolish bridesmaids, this parable about being prepared and waiting seems at first reading to have very little to offer that is life giving. I really expected something better from Jesus than the Boy Scouts/Girl Guides motto of '*be prepared.*' And certainly, I expected something more than *look after your own concerns at the expense of others.*

Is the injunction to watch, to be alert, perhaps to make a virtue of insomnia (I am qualified in that department!), or to perpetuate a culture of “watching out” - to be forever careful. Perhaps with the current state of world and national affairs this might be good advice, rather like a spiritual terror alert.

When I read the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, I am grateful that this is not the only parable we have in which Jesus speaks of the realm of God. It's ungenerous and harsh, and not what we expect of Jesus' revealing of God and life to us.

It's mean and final and judgemental! Couldn't those smarty-pants bridesmaids have shared their oil? Their actions don't seem very Christian.

I'm glad that Jesus told other stories. I'm relieved that there are other ways to describe the realm of God that do not involve bridesmaids and oil reserves and doors that will lock half of us out, just because we were a little late.

Thank goodness for the hope in the sower and the mustard seeds, and the other parables - so we can manage this one parable that depends on not sharing what you have.

Is this how we want to define a wise person, someone who only takes care of herself? Is this the kind of people we want to be as a church? The people who stockpile their oil, who believe that if other people are in need of liberation or human rights or food and water, it's their own damn fault?

Jesus seems to be contradicting himself in this story. These wise bridesmaids don't seem to be acting in accordance with the Beatitudes. The Jesus who said, *'don't store up treasures on earth'* in chapter six, now tells us in Matthew 25 to keep large oil reserves.

The Jesus who said, *'do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body what you will wear'* now says *'Worry about your oil; that's the main thing. Worry about whether you have enough for you, and forget about everyone else; they are not your problem.'*

The Jesus who said, *'ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you,* now says *'unless of course you're late, in which case, you might as well forget it'.*

Or the Jesus who said, *'In everything do unto others as you would have them do to you,'* now says, *'this doesn't apply to oil. Oil changes all the rules.'*

This parable challenges most of the things I believe about God. If taking care of yourself is the main message of the gospels, the miracle of the loaves and fishes would never have happened. Jesus wouldn't have fed that hungry crowd. Instead of *"The Feeding of the Five Thousand,"* we would have *"The Moral of the Very Few Who Came Prepared."*

Surely, we do not want to tell the world: emulate a bunch of smarmy bridesmaids and stingy oil men. We want better for ourselves, for the men on Manus Island, and for our country.

Of course, it's good to be prepared. It would be stupid of me to stand at the lectern this morning without having prepared a reflection. But shouldn't Jesus have more wisdom than a boy scout or an insurance agent?

So, we have to find another way through this parable. I think it might be helpful, rather than focusing on preparedness, to ask what the oil actually symbolises? Is it something that cannot, in fact, be given away?

Protestants are not very into oil in liturgy. However, there are, in Catholic and Anglo-Catholic traditions, three separate oils - the oil of Catechumens used at baptism, the oil of the sick for healing and the dying, and the oil of Chrism used at Confirmations and Ordinations.

Oil has a long history in liturgy in both Jewish and Christian traditions.

Jesus is called “the Christ”, “the Messiah” – “the Anointed” - and people are always anointed with oil of some description. In Matthew oil seems to be used in the context of our relationships with one another. Perhaps the oil of God is what brings people together; what brings them together to make their relationship harmonious and justice-based.

The oil we use today in ordinary life is most often the cooking oil. In stir-frys, it brings the heat to the various ingredients in an even and homogeneous way.

Oil is also ordinarily used for lubricating machines, like cars. Oil means that the parts slide over one another easily, avoiding the horrible graunching that happens when it runs out and the parts cut into each other, eventually destroying the motor.

Though our tradition speaks of three separate and distinct oils, there is also unity between liberation, healing and ordination. Jesus’s name – Joshua in Hebrew – means deliverance, from and to. It is derived from the Hebrew root that denotes “spacious”.

To be saved, liberated, to be healed, and to be authorised and enabled to minister to others (baptism, healing, ordination and confirmation) are all connected.

The parable speaks of flasks of oil that are needed to be ready for the celebration of the wedding.

In two places in the Bible, Psalm 45:7 and Hebrews 1:9, we find the verse: “*God has anointed you with the oil of gladness.*”

Perhaps the flasks of oil are gladness, joyfulness and willingness to join in the celebration of the marriage, with other people – all sorts of other people - as guests.

Another way of looking at some sort of oil that cannot be given away is to think about it in terms of our spiritual life.

We have this amazing flame sculpture thing that we use at Pentecost at Pitt Street. Concealed at the point of each flame is an oil burner, with a wick, so it makes real fire. The first year I used it, some of the flames went out during the Pentecost service. Foolishly, I hadn’t checked the oil levels beforehand.

If there is no oil in the lamps of our spiritual life, the light goes out and we have nothing to light the path ahead, and no light of the world to share with others.

So today we might ask ourselves what fills us up spiritually when we run dry? What replenishes our oil? Where do we find God, and how can we make sure that we get enough of that oil for our lamp, so that God can fill us up again? Because we will run dry. We all run dry! And when we do, we can't be a light for anyone.

You probably know the signs in your life when you’re running out of oil. For me, it’s too busy to cook. For many of us, it’s too preoccupied with our own worries to be present to the needs of other people, or to turn our attention to the voices crying for justice in our world.

For many of us, it's because we are too distracted to have a real conversation with our partner or dear friends about anything other than logistics or domestic concerns.

So it seems there are some kinds of oil you can't borrow from anyone else. There are some kinds of preparation that we can only do for ourselves. There are some reserves that no one can build up for us. You can't borrow someone else's peace of mind or their passion for the Sacred. You can't say to your friend: "*You have such a happy relationship. Could you give me some of that?*"

It just doesn't work. You have to find it yourself. You have to figure out what fills you up, spiritually, and then make sure you have some to carry with you, every single minute of every day, because that's how often you'll need it.

Even so you will run out. Time will run out. The hour gets late, everyone gets sleepy. We all doze; we all put off the things that really matter.

In the end, the oil that fuels you is going to come from what fuels you spiritually right now. It's going to come from where you see God, where you find the sacred, today.

And where is that? Well, Jesus tells us in some of those other more light filled parables and stories: *I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was in prison, and you visited me. I was sick, and you comforted me.* That's where we will find Jesus today. That's where we will get filled up. That's where we gather the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. All of those things that we can't borrow from our friends.

You don't fill your lamp because you're afraid you're going to get locked out of the Realm of God. You don't stockpile oil because then you can turn everyone else away and that's so much fun. No, you stop at the filling station and fill your flask and take it with you, because you can't wait to encounter the Christ in Christa/Community. You fill your flask with oil out of joy.

And in joy, we touch the deep wells of our spiritual tradition: the tradition of justice making, the vision of Amos, where justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. And we connect with theologians of our time, like Carter Heyward, whose prophetic poetry calls us to lives of mutuality, to lives of love, to lives of liberation for ourselves and others.

In Carter's words, remembering that we are called to love, she says:

To love you is to be pushed by a power

God, both terrifying and comforting

to touch and be touched by you.

To love you is to sing with you, cry with you, pray with you, and act with you to re-create the world.

To say "I love you" means—let the revolution begin!

God bless the revolution.

Amen.