How much oil do we have?

Anne and I visited PLC this week to discuss the school's potential involvement in next year's World Day of Prayer service – it was all very positive. On the way to the meeting, we were taken through the chapel – the chapel we're they've already begun celebrating Advent – because, after all, school breaks up on the fourth of December, and they have to get through all of Advent and Christmas by then! There's not that much time left!

O another day, I was speaking to some young people, and I commented on how many shopping days there were left to Christmas. The concept of a 'shopping day' was quite foreign to them – and in fact they pointed out there is no time that you cannot shop anymore.

But, including today, there are only 46 shopping days until Christmas! That means there's only 46 days for you to have your Christmas shopping completed! But we know lots of people will leave their Christmas shopping until Christmas Eve.

People like to leave things until they absolutely have to be done, don't they?

If you know anyone at school or university, well… how often to assignments get put off to the last minute? How often do people cram for a test at the last moment? In a work situation, how often do reports get put off to the last minute? In a church situation, how often is the sermon written late on a Saturday night? (Only twice, in my case!)

We like our deadlines. We like our due dates. And if we don't have those things, we find it hard. We don't like uncertainty.

When we know that something's going to happen, or something is going to be needed, but we don't know when, it can become a problem – and it almost always becomes stressful.

Waiting is generally bad enough. But waiting for an uncertain period is even worse. What do we do in the meantime? How long can we realistically wait? Can we ignore it in the meantime? Should we assume it's going to happen very soon? Or assume that it will be much, much later?

The parable in our gospel reading today is about waiting – and about being prepared.

Traditionally it is known as the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, but sometimes called the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, and, like so many of Jesus' parables it's a bit strange.

We need to remember that this is a parable – a story – but not a story made up for the fun of it, but a story to cause a reaction in those that hear it. Just like the parable of the wedding banquet we had a few weeks ago, there are some uncomfortable – or even disturbing – elements to it.

This particular parable tells the story of ten virgins – or bridesmaids in some translations – probably just 'young women' is okay – who are waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. They all have their lamps – as apparently was the tradition – to light the way for the bridegroom. They waited, and waited, and waited, but the bridegroom was delayed, and they nodded off.

In modern times, of course, it's usually the bride that is late – but in today's parable, it's the bridegroom who's late. In fact, it seems he was very late.

It wasn't until midnight that the cry rang out! All the young women rush to get their lamps ready – they would have to trim the wicks so they didn't make too much smoke, and as they did so, half of them realised they had no oil left. So, obviously, the first thing to do is ask those with oil to share.

That sounds reasonable, doesn't it?

The foolish young women had no oil in their lamps – if they didn't get some, they were going to miss out on lighting the way for the bridegroom – and miss out on the banquet. The wise young women considered the request.

'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' (25:9)

That sounds reasonable, doesn't it? You don't have oil, go and buy some.

So the foolish young women went to try and buy some oil. Now, it was midnight – and it would be nearly 2000 years before there was a 24 hour service station – so it's hard to imagine where they could find anyone to sell them oil at that time. But finally, having bought some oil (presumably by pounding on some poor oil merchant's door!), they returned to find that, in their absence, the bridegroom <u>had</u> arrived, and he, along with the wise young women, had gone into the wedding banquet. And shut the door behind them.

And when the foolish women found the door shut, they pleaded, "Lord, lord, open the door for us."

Then verse 12 tells us "But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you.'"

They had their chance. But the foolish young women weren't ready. And they missed out.

They <u>missed out</u> on meeting the bridegroom. They <u>missed out</u> on the wedding banquet.

It seems harsh, doesn't it? Shouldn't the others have shared their oil with them? Wouldn't a gracious host open the door, even if the guests were late?

Well, maybe. But this story isn't just a nice story, and nor is it a story about how we should share, or how we should allow latecomers entry. (Although they are good things to do!)

It's a story – a parable – about waiting for an uncertain amount of time, and about being prepared.

The foolish women missed out because they didn't have enough oil. They missed out because they weren't prepared.

It was something so minor. They just didn't have enough oil with them. They even had enough money with them to buy more oil (The strait of Hormuz was open back then, so it was cheaper!). But sometimes it's the minor things that cause the major problems.

A taxi breaks down on the way to the airport, and you miss a flight.

When you get to the shops on Christmas Eve, you find they've sold out of prawns.

When the child opens the present on Christmas day, you realise that you have no C sized batteries in the house.

Do you know that old poem?

For want of a nail the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe the horse was lost.
For want of a horse the rider was lost.
For want of a rider the battle was lost.
For want of a battle the kingdom was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

The foolish women missed out on the bridegroom and the wedding banquet all for the want of a jar of oil.

It seems very harsh – and it is – but think about it: All the young women had the same opportunities and the only difference among them was that some were wise and some were foolish. It's not that some could afford oil, and some couldn't (and indeed, the foolish bridesmaids went off to buy some oil at the last minute, so we can assume that they all could afford it!). It's not that some had a better idea of when the bridegroom was due to arrive than others. Some just weren't prepared.

The only difference was that some did the wise thing, and some didn't. They all had the same opportunities, they all had the same invitation to the banquet, but some acted foolishly and they missed out.

None of the young women who waited for the bridegroom that night knew when he would arrive, but those that were wise acted accordingly. They brought extra jars of oil

with them, as well as the oil in their lamps. And because they acted wisely, they were ready when the bridegroom came.

If we go back to the other parable about a wedding banquet – the one we looked at a few weeks ago from Matthew 22 - when we heard that all were invited, but that someone who came chose not to wear the wedding robe, and was thrown out as a result. The one thrown out didn't do the right thing – I think we can safely say that he, like the foolish virgins of today's parable, didn't act wisely. And he missed out on the banquet.

Jesus concludes the parable, saying "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

It would be really nice to know the day and the hour, wouldn't it? It would be nice – if you were a bridesmaid – to know when the bridegroom was going to arrive.

But for us, for Christians who await the return of Jesus, or who await the day when we will meet him when we die, we also do not know the day that that will happen.

We don't know. In fact, we can't know:

Jesus said "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." (Matthew 24:36)

The point is that, as we wait, we need to be prepared. We need to be staying faithful, always.

There is often a tension in our lives between using what we have today, and providing for the future. And there's certainly a similar tension in our churches, do we save our money for the future, or spend it today?

After all, Jesus told the parable of the rich fool who thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'" (Luke 12:17-20)

And Jesus said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

And you might think that this parable means that we need to have enough oil in the jar or enough money in the bank or enough grain in the silo to provide for the future. And it certainly shouldn't be interpreted to accumulating more than we could ever need – like the man who built the big silos.

I heard last week someone say "We have too many billionaires in the world, and too many trillionaires" … of course there is only one trillionare. Many people think that is too many.

But I don't think this parable is really about the need to save for a vague future, or for a rainy day, or for the need to accumulate vast hoards of wealth; I think it's about the need to ensure that we're adequately provisioned for the tasks we have to do.

The young women waiting for the bridegroom needed to be adequately provisioned. They should have been prepared. A lamp without sufficient oil would become useless. The bridesmaids who took their lamps and extra jars of oil understood that they needed to be prepared for the long haul, that they needed oil – fuel for their lamps.

And so do we – and the fuel of our Christian lives is prayer – our ongoing communication with God.

And it's the scriptures – growing in the knowledge of God and understanding better how we should be living our lives in response to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

And it's the engagement as the body of Christ – our fellowship with each other and with the wider church. Encouraging each other. Helping each other. Celebrating together.

And importantly it's also being open to the action of the Holy Spirit within our hearts and within our lives – our openness to being changed by God.

And if we're taking all that fuel into our hearts and lives, then we are being wise. We will be ready. We will be prepared.

We are, of course, saved solely and completely by the grace of God…God's undeserved, unearned, unmerited favour. When we take it into our hearts that Jesus died on the cross for us, when we turn away from our sins and turn to God, we are saved.

And that is the free gift of God, and if we truly accept that free gift, then our lives will reflect that. We will wisely choose to do what God wants us to do.

We shouldn't be trying to get our houses and our lives in order the moment before Jesus arrives – or the moment before we go to meet him – but we should be ready – we should be staying faithful - even though we don't know the day or hour.

We spend so much of our lives planning for events, working to dates, working to deadlines, but there is so much uncertainty in the world and in our lives. In amongst that

chaos and uncertainty, we can all know the sure and certain hope that Jesus gives us, even though we don't know when he will return, we can know that he will.

And we as his followers can be ready for that day, we will be wise and we will have oil for our metaphorical lamps, and we will be staying faithful, today and always.

Amen.