

Archbishop Thabo Makgoba
Diocese of Cape Town Synod: First Homily
“The Good News of Faith and Love”
26 August 2011

Matthew 25:1-13

[Jesus said to his disciples] ‘Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. ³When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; ⁴but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. ⁵As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. ⁶But at midnight there was a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” ⁷Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.” ⁹But the wise replied, “No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.” ¹⁰And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. ¹¹Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, “Lord, lord, open to us.” ¹²But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I do not know you.” ¹³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.’ (NRSV)

May I speak in the name of the One God, who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of Life. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, last night for my Charge I used verses from Matthew’s Gospel that were set for the daily Eucharist. As the passages for today and tomorrow also seemed so apt, I thought we would continue with Matthew’s gospel in our daily Eucharists and Bible Studies. After breakfast, we will begin our working days by reading Holy Scripture together, in groups. For it is God’s word which must always be our starting point, in our task of understanding our identity and calling, as the body of Christ for these times, for this place.

Today’s reading continues with Jesus’ response to his disciples’ questions – at the beginning of chapter 24 of St Matthew’s Gospel – about ‘the end of the age’ and his second coming. We too live in these ‘between times’, after the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit upon the Church, but before the final judgement and redemption in which God’s purposes are fully completed.

As St Matthew records in the long discourse of chapters 24 and 25, Jesus’ key message is that only the Father knows ‘the day and the hour’ of what he has in store. We should not waste our time speculating on what and when and how. Rather, as we heard last night, our responsibility is to be awake, to be alert, and to be faithful and wise as we live the lives and carry out the tasks entrusted to us, with perseverance and diligence. And, as St Paul says, we are to be earnest in prayer, pursue holy and blameless lives, and seek to grow in the good news of faith and love.

This is a deeply spiritual calling. But it is not *only* a spiritual task. For just as we are called to love God, and also to love our neighbours, with our hearts and minds and bodies, as well as souls — so too, we are to be alert and faithful in the emotional, mental, and material areas of our lives, as well as the spiritual. God’s love and Christ’s redemption are for the whole of creation, and every aspect of everyone in it. Nothing lies outside his concern. Furthermore, this is not only our calling as individuals, but also ‘with our neighbours’: in other words, it applies to our corporate lives together within our churches, within our Diocese and within our city.

So please bear in mind this big picture, in all its dimensions, in our plenary and group discussions today, as well as in our Bible Studies. As I look back over the time since our last Synod, I am heartened to see how far forward we have come with the tasks we set ourselves there. We now have a full time dean of studies, and a diocesan youth worker; Bishop Garth has a full time assistant in Archdeacon Horace; our environmental awareness has expanded significantly; and we have done the groundwork to develop our Social Responsibility.

On a wider scale, our Synod motion two years ago requested that the Bishops produce guidelines for the pastoral care of those in, or affected by, same gender civil unions. This has given rise to a draft which has now been sent to all Dioceses for consultation. One of today's groups will particularly look at this.

These may appear to be largely technical steps, but they all aid us in achieving our goal of faithfully sharing the love of God, within the Church and beyond its walls. We can go forward with confidence, building in the ways I outlined last night.

This morning's reading provides much to consider. It is characteristic of Jesus' parables that he largely leaves his listeners to work out for themselves what God is saying to them. He may point to some overarching message, but the stories he tells provoke us to rethink our presuppositions, and raise questions that help us see our own situations with fresh eyes. Today's reading is clearly about the need to be awake, to be prepared, to ensure one has the necessary resources and uses them well – there are very clear resonances with our concerns for good governance and faithful stewardship.

But if we pause with the passage a little longer, we can find other questions to prompt us to deeper reflection on the life of the Diocese of Cape Town. Here are just a few ideas:

First, let us never forget that a wedding is a joyful occasion, a celebration of love; we look forward with excited anticipation. This is the context of our relationship with Jesus our Lord!

The bridesmaids have their own allotted tasks and responsibilities; and have to make their own preparations. They can't rely on others to bail them out. What are the parallels for church leaders with our particular tasks and responsibilities? What do they mean for us individually? Our Parishes? Our Diocese?

We might also ask ourselves, what is the 'oil' we need to have in our lamps – to burn when the time comes and we need it?

Then is the challenge to consider how we are like the foolish bridesmaids. Are there areas we are neglecting – where we are 'running low'?

Or we could ask what insights the parable gives to our wider political and economic context. Are there areas where some of us have oil, and others – despite best intentions, or for reasons beyond their control – have run out? How are we to respond?

It is important to remember that one parable does not necessarily give all the answers – and there are often aspects of parables where the character and behaviour of individuals is in contrast to the nature of God. So we need to bear in mind other passages, such as that in Matthew 25 where the sheep and goats are divided on the basis of how they dealt with the needy and suffering.

But on the other hand, we might also ask ourselves to what areas do we need to say 'no'? A need is not the same as a specific calling. The Church cannot do everything for everyone. Some things are beyond our capacity to help without risking our own primary God-given vocation.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ – I am not going to give you answers to these questions! The nature of the Church, as the body of Christ, is that we best discover God's will for us through taking council together in his presence. This is the heart of Synod!

So let us move now to breakfast and to Bible Study, and seek his will for us together. Amen