

KEEPING RELIGION ALIVE

Martin Camroux

This story of the 10 bridesmaids, or as it used to be called “The wise and the Foolish Virgins” sometimes gets unexpected responses. Like the preacher who said “My friends where would you rather be – on the road with the wise virgins or with the foolish virgins in the dark” and was rather taken aback by the response. Well how did you take the story this morning? Did anything speak to you?

Lets go over it and try and bring it to life. One of the problems in the religious life is that what starts out fine doesn't always last. At the beginning of Jesus ministry crowds flocked to him. They enjoyed the loaves and fishes. They liked his wonderful words. But when he said, “You're got to love your enemies”. When he said, “You've got to visit those in need”. When he said, “You've got not to let your life be organised around material things. You're got to dare to put your trust in God.” When it seemed what was ahead was a cross – the crowds dropped away.

And Jesus says the Kingdom of God is like a wedding feast. The bridesmaids are there and they all wonderful. You can imagine them with their hair made up, their dresses and special ornamental lamps. But while they're waiting for the groom to arrive some of the guests run out of oil and their lamps go out. And when the bridegroom arrives to start the Party some of them aren't there.

So Jesus is saying it's like this those who hear my call. To begin with they look and sound fine. But when the crunch comes there isn't the oil in their lamps to see them through.

The experience of starting a faith journey and then somehow it loses its power is still one we all know. Many of us know people who started off with a vibrant religious faith and somewhere it went dead. Maybe there's a personal crisis and they discover just how hard life can be. Or maybe as the years skip by our faith gets taken for granted. And it gets dusty and withers. Or maybe our faith was fine when we were in our old home church where we grew up. And then we moved somewhere else. And somehow it isn't the same.

I once test drove a car in Birkenhead. I got on the motorway, put my foot down and it conked out – it had an empty tank. There are times in the religious life when you put down your foot on the gas and you find you are running on empty.

This text obviously is a warning. When it comes to the challenge a superficial faith isn't going to be enough. The old add about Brill cream, that a little dab will do for you, is not adequate when it comes to religion. Make sure you're got a full tank and a reserve tank. Or when you put down your foot on the gas you may find you're running on empty. Maybe some of you have something like this experience. How faith goes dry.

So this morning let me suggest 3 ways to keep faith alive and make sure there's oil in the lamp to get you through.

Now the first one is this – you need times when you're alone and still. Says the Psalmist "Be still and know that I am God". There's something about that quiet solitary moment that something can happen that otherwise would be impossible. Jesus knew this. When you pray, he said, go somewhere and shut the door and get away from everyone. Often he would withdraw from his disciples to be alone and pray. He couldn't be in the crowd and throng unless he could get out in the hills and be alone.

We have to build times of quietness into our lives. That great Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey was once asked how long he spent in private prayer each day. Ramsey replied "About a minute. But it takes me half an hour of silence to get to that one minute".

How we do this is up to each one of us. Maybe it's making a discipline of morning and evening prayer. Maybe it's a quiet room and just shutting yourself way. Maybe it's listening to music or maybe out walking in the country. But somehow if we are going to hear God we have to be quiet.

I look at my own experience. When I think of the moments when God has been most real often its been in the stillness. On one occasion visiting Swanage I left everyone behind on the beach. I walked round the shore to Peverill Point and climbed up the hill. And the view was splendid. There was the bay, the cliffs, blue sky, the Isle of Wight. And I thought what a joy it is to be alive. What a wonderful world. No-one can tell me that all this is chance. God is here.

Nothing really comes in the spiritual life except to those who know how to use quietness, "in deep mid-silence, open-doored to God".

But then secondly the spiritual life demands being with people. Sometimes we need to be alone. But at other times we need people. In the Romanian Orthodox Church they have a saying "Every man goes to hell on his own. But he goes to heaven only in the company of others". John Wesley saw the same truth "There's no such thing" he said "as the solitary Christian". Of course you can be a Christian without belonging to a church but if you are you a Christian will always want to be together sharing with others.

This week I learn of the death of one of the members of my first church back in Southampton, a man of great integrity, good sense and warm compassion. When I first went there he was editor of the Church magazine. Every month I used to take round the ministers letter. If I was late I would get a phone call "How's Dear Friends coming on?" If you ask me what makes me believe the Christian gospel true it part of my answer is that I have seen it lived out in people like him. In every Church I've been there have been people whose support and example has kept my Christian faith alive. Time and time again

I've seen people get so close to each other in need that as the Russian saying, when's ones cried the others have tasted the salt.

You remember the old saying if you light a single stick it will always go out. But if you put sticks together you get a blaze. That's true of the life of faith. "Where two or three meet together in my name" said Jesus "I am there among them".

Thirdly the spiritual life needs to be backed by disciplined thought and study. The Victorians would set time aside to read and to think about religion. Today that is done too little. When I visit people if I get a chance I always try and look at their bookshelves to see what kind of books they read. It's amazing how often one sees books on gardening or winemaking or car maintenance or the Royal family. Rather less do I see biblical commentaries or other religious books.

I am personally convinced that reading the Bible or good Christian books is one way the religious life is kept. Think of John Wesley and the deep renewal of the Christian life that he brought. On the day of experience in Aldersgate Street he's been hearing an address on the letter to the Romans – so there was the study of the Scriptures. Just as importantly he'd been profoundly affected by a series of books by William Law. On reading one of Law's books he said "The light flowed mightily upon my soul".

All my life I can think of books that have done that for me, starting with John Robinson's *Honest to God* when I was at school, Harry Emerson Fosdick's sermons when I was at University. More lately Marcus Borg "Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time" or Bishop Spong's autobiography.

This autumn we have our book study of Harold Kushner's "When Bad Things Happen to Good People". Then in November there's a series of Bible studies. The life of faith needs continued nourishment. Even people who been through PH D programmes still need to come to adult education programmes where they can be nourished in the ways of the kingdom of God.

I offer these principles not as all there is simply as some of the ways to keep faith alive. is to be said but as underlying preconditions for a strong spiritual life. If the Master were here He would not try to run us into one mould. But whatever methods may be right for us we do need some means by which in time the eternal grows real, by which God becomes a living presence to us, conscience is quickened, resources are deepened, and hope is renewed.

So maybe we should all be checking our own lives today. And if anything is missing then this is what the service is about today. This is a day to say Lord fill my cup, let it overflow. Not just a little. Fill my cup.

What were we singing early "Give me courage when the world is rough, Keep me loving through the world is tough" that's it. Make me the kind of Christian who can be counted

on when the going gets rough. Make me the kind of Christian whose faith doesn't wilt as life goes on. And if that happens then this parable we are dealing with this morning will have done its work. May it begin in me and in you as well. Amen.

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