Lamps

November 8th, 2020

The world is vast, greater than my mind can fathom. It is a beautiful, formidable, terrible, frail, gigantic, little world. It is a world that I have studied and thought about for many years, from my youngest days, when I first brought home a giant book on Ancient Civilizations from the library—a book almost as large as me. Later on, there was *The Story of Mankind* by Henrik Willem van Loon with his idiosyncratic pen drawings that resembled scrimshaw. One of my other favourite childhood reads was *The Travels* of Marco Polo—there was something fascinating about men and women who departed into the unknown, traveling thousands of miles to discover their world. In those days, I would always go to the window in our classroom where the globe was. The radiators were close by, and it was warm during the gray winter. And by the light from the window, I would try to remember the names of all the countries and their capitals. The world seemed colourful and beautiful according to this globe. One teacher had to gently remind me that it was an old globe, and some of the countries on it had disappeared. Only a few years later, I would learn that a great number of new countries were appearing, almost daily. The world changes. It is beautiful and it is terrible and it is frail. In terms of physics, the greatest source of energy and light for our world is the sun. And spiritually speaking, the greatest source of our light is God. I believe that what makes the world beautiful is the way the light of God works through history. What makes the world terrible is when humans try to snuff out the light. Darkness fell upon the earth when Jesus hung on the cross, rejected by humanity, and darkness falls whenever we betray, forget, or deny Him today. In more recent history, a great moment of light was when in 1988, 5,000 Christians gathered in Hviesdoslav Square of Bratislava in Czechoslovakia to call for religious freedom. It was called the Candle Demonstration (*sviečková demonštrácia*). It made possible the Velvet Revolution, when Czechoslovakia emerged from the darkness of communist oppression. Faith came before freedom. In our lectionary reading today, we see how precious the light of faith is: “‘Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, “Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.” Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps” (Matthew 25:1-7).

Lamps help us to see what we would not otherwise see; they help us to learn and to enjoy this immense and mysterious world. It is no accident, thematically, that light plays a central role in some famous thought experiments from history. Venerable Bede used the lamps of a church to explain why the moon can appear higher or larger than the sun in the sky (*De temporum ratione*). There are some orphan texts included in the *Arabian Nights* that were not originally part of them. Quite a number of them were the work of a Syrian Maronite Christian named Hanna Diyab. One of them is the famoustale of *Aladdin*, which features a wonderful lamp, a lamp that grants you the fulfillment of your wishes. It is tempting to pray like Aladdin, rubbing the lamp and hoping that God will give us the desires of hearts. Our politics, economics and technology, and much of modern theology are built on this principle of the magic lamp. Another kind of magic lamp is the invention of the magic lantern, ancestor of the slide projector, ancestor of our shared screens we are using now. Appearing in the 17th century and developing from there, magic lanterns gave us the ability to project images where there were none. That is another way we sometimes pray. Our lectionary today, however, suggests quite a different purpose for lamps, lamps which are neither magic wish-granting lamps nor magic lanterns: “Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ But 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.’ And 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. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matthew 25:2-13).

In one sense, it is an eschatological parable speaking of individual responsibility and the shortness of time. There are some things others cannot give you or do for you. As William Barclay notes: “It warns us that there are certain things which cannot be borrowed. The foolish virgins found it impossible to borrow oil, when they discovered they needed it. A man cannot borrow a relationship with God; he must possess it for himself. A man cannot borrow a character; he must be clothed with it. We cannot always be living on the spiritual capital which others have amassed. There are certain things we must win or acquire for ourselves, for we cannot borrow them from others” (William Barclay, "Commentary on Matthew 25:4"). Secondly, there is not an infinite amount of time to return to God. In the end, I believe all scripture scholars can agree that whatever this parable means, it urgently insists on the possession of light and the means to keep that light burning. The lamps are not meant to give us a world we want; the lamps are to illuminate the world that exists and to share the wisdom of God as we await the return of Christ.

What are lamps? A lamp is an object that uses fuel to emit light. An ancient oil lamp was often made out of clay or some alloy, and it contained some kind of oil and wick. A lamp had to be made, the fuel had to made, the wick had to be made. It involved work. In that sense, there is no difference from the modern flashlight today, which requires fuel—a battery and bulb, which also have to be manufactured. When I was a kid, we still had kerosene lamps and stoves in Hokkaido. Some of the lamps were decorative, some were practical. The Kitaichi Glass Factory in Otaru was famous for its beautiful decorative lamps. Along with magic lamps and magic lanterns, however, a decorative lamp, while useful, is not exactly practical or necessary—it is not the elegance of the blown glass that makes the light work. It is the insides—the wick and the oil. The kerosene stoves, unlike the lamps, were an imperative in northern Japan with its cold, snowy winters. They were for surviving. I remember struggling with the heavy jerry cans when I was about Malcolm’s age to refill my stove. The history of kerosene reveals that just extracting it was quite involved: “The process of distilling crude oil/petroleum into kerosene, as well as other hydrocarbon compounds, was first written about in the 9th century by the Persian scholar Rāzi (or Rhazes). In his Kitab al-Asrar (*Book of Secrets*), the physician and chemist Razi described two methods for the production of kerosene, termed naft abyad (نفط ابيض"white naphtha"), using an apparatus called an alembic. One method used clay as an absorbent, whereas the other method used ammonium chloride (sal ammoniac). The distillation process was repeated until most of the volatile hydrocarbon fractions had been removed and the final product was perfectly clear and safe to burn. Kerosene was also produced during the same period from oil shale and bitumen by heating the rock to extract the oil, which was then distilled. During the Chinese Ming Dynasty, the Chinese made use of kerosene through extracting and purifying petroleum and then converted it into lamp fuel. The Chinese made use of petroleum for lighting lamps and heating homes as early as 1500 BC.” (*Wikipedia,* s.v. kerosene). It takes great effort to have light in yourself, to share that light, and to keep that light burning. Magic lamps do not grow on trees, and real lamps do not, either. Light may be a gift of God’s grace, but if you do not make any effort to seek that grace or know that grace, what kind of light will you have? Jesus himself said, “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (John 9:4-5).

What is this light in our lamps? What makes the world bright? I can fill a lamp with water or club soda and label it a kerosene lamp, but it will never burn for a single moment, and if I have read the parable correctly, some bridesmaids had oil for their lamps and some did not. They were all bridesmaids—none of them lacked bridesmaid credentials—but only five had lamps with oil and only five were admitted to the wedding feast. It was not the label of bridesmaid that made someone a bridesmaid. It was the flame. It is not a label that gives you salvation and sanctification. It is the flame. It is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will not burn where He is not welcome. The Scriptures say: “For it is you who light my lamp; the LORD my God lightens my darkness” (Psalm 18:28). In order to bear the light, God must live in you, and in order for God to live in you, you must conform your life to God. One of the disadvantages of the Argand lamp invented in 1780 was that the oil reservoir had to sit above the burner because vegetable oil would not climb very far up the wick. The kerosene lamp removed this problem because of the capillary action of the fuel. The old kerosene lamps had glass chimneys to protect the flame from being blown out, and they had a throat, or constriction, to enable proper combustion. The shape of the lamp mattered; the shape of your life matters. I should be faithful to God, to the word of God, to the way that God has instructed the faithful throughout history. The way we live, read, think, and act in relation to God matters; it will affect our own flame and what we can share with others. It is time to ask ourselves what is truly dark and what is truly light. Proverbs 6:23 says: “For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light, and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life”; “The light of the righteous shines brightly, but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out” (Proverbs 13:9). I do not want to carry an empty lamp. That would neither benefit me nor anybody else. The world may seem to be slipping into darkness, but what we call darkness and light must not be defined by our desires or our imagination, and certainly not by what the world says it is or is not (Isaiah 5:20). For sure it is always time to put away darkness. It is also time to put away our magic lamps and our magic lanterns.

What you burn matters as well. One can tell from the above illustration that different kinds of lamps are designed for different fuels. And water does not burn. Without the oil, there is no point in having a lamp, much less the label of a lamp. What do you have in your hands—do you have a lamp? What is in your lamp? Is it kerosene or club soda? Is your lamp on a lampstand or under a bowl? What are you sharing with the world, and does it resemble what you read of Christ in the Scriptures? And does it resemble the testimony of the apostles we read in the Scriptures? Should the light of the world illuminate the word of God? Or should the light of the word of God illuminate the world? Which light source do you find more tempting and alluring? Which one do you think is timeless and will outlast the other? One of the greatest psalms says: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). Lastly, Jesus Christ himself said: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

The greatest source of heat on Earth is the sun—no other heat source can come close. The golden sun does not accommodate its radiation, brilliance or temperature to our needs. It just shines the way it is meant to shine; it is our great lantern for our solar system. The gospels do not tell you what kind of world you can have. The gospels shine a light on the world to show it as it is, and the gospels give us a path to the world that will come. Lamps help us to see what we would not otherwise see; they help us to learn and to enjoy this immense and mysterious world. Christ, the light of the world, gives us a lamp that is essentially Christ Himself, and He helps us to learn to follow Him, to be like Him, to share Him throughout this fragile little world, giving the faith, hope and charity that burn for all time and have no end. Nobody can hold the lamp for you; nobody can trim the lamp for you; nobody can prepare the oil for you. But you can come to Christ, and He will give you all of the light that there is to be had. The only way a city on a hill can be hidden is when nobody has oil in their lamps. I do not want to live in a darkened city; I want to live in the city on the hill full of light, the city that John describes at the end of Revelation: “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there” (Revelation 21:22-26).