

What We Did Without Knowing

One

“Then the Kingdom of Heaven will be like ten virgins, who took their lamps, and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. Those who were foolish, when they took their lamps, took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom delayed, they all slumbered and slept.

But at midnight there was a cry, ‘Behold! The bridegroom is coming! Come out to meet him.’ Then all those virgins arose, 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 answered, saying, ‘What if there isn’t enough for us and you? You go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’

While they went away to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins also came, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Most certainly I tell you, I don’t know you.’

Watch therefore, for you don’t know the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.”

MATTHEW 25:1-13

Ten young women are standing in the dark outside a house, waiting for a wedding to start.

They are not passers-by. They have been asked. Each of them has come out for this, carrying a lamp, dressed for it, with a part to play when the man arrives. Whatever else is true of them, all ten are on the list.

He is late. Nobody is told why. The delay is long enough that standing turns into sitting and sitting turns into sleep, and here the story says something most retellings quietly drop: they all slumbered and slept. Not five. All of them. Nobody in this story keeps watch.

So whatever divides these women was already settled before anyone lay down.

The shout comes at midnight. They get up and trim their lamps, and it is in that ordinary movement – the same movement all ten make – that the difference finally shows.

Our lamps are going out. Present tense. Not a thing they noticed hours ago and put off. It is happening now, at the moment they need light. This is the first anyone knows of it, including them.

They ask for oil. The answer sounds hard until you hear the question in it: *What if there isn't enough for us and you?* It is not a refusal to share. It is arithmetic. Split it and ten lamps go out instead of five, and nobody has any light.

So they do the sensible thing. They go to buy. It is the right response, it is what the wise ones told them to do, and while they are gone the bridegroom arrives, the party goes in, and the door is shut.

They come back and stand at it. *Lord, Lord, open to us.*

Most certainly I tell you, I don't know you.

Two

Start with the object.

The Greek word is *lampas*. It is not the word Matthew uses for the little lamp you put on a stand instead of under a basket — that one is *lychnos*, a clay dish the size of your palm, a wick floating in oil, enough to see across a room. A *lampas* is usually something else. A rag bound around the end of a pole, soaked in oil, and lit. A torch. Not everyone agrees the word means that here, but the picture fits the story better than the little dish does, and it makes sense of what happens next.

A torch does not burn for hours. It burns bright and it burns fast, and then the rag needs soaking again.

Which turns the flask into something other than a precaution. It is not a spare. It is the second half of the equipment. The women who came without one had not forgotten a nicety — they had come out for a night's work carrying something that could only manage the first quarter of an hour of it. From a distance, in the early evening, with everything lit, you could not have told the two groups apart. They all had torches and all the torches were burning.

The oil is the ministry. It is what you were doing while the waiting went on. Who you sat with. What you carried. The visits nobody counted.

And here is where two people who look the same come apart. For one, the ministry is something they do. It can be named, and it gets named. For the other it was simply what had to be done, and so it never gets filed anywhere at all.

Then the asking. *Give us some of your oil.*

It cannot be done. Not because the wise are stingy, and not because the oil is too precious to share. Because it is not a thing. It is an accumulation. You cannot lend someone your years in a prison visits room.

The foolish arrive with the apparatus and nothing burnt into it.

Three

“For it is like a man, going into another country, who called his own servants, and entrusted his goods to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one; to each according to his own ability. Then he went on his journey. Immediately he who received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. In the same way, he also who got the two gained another two. But he who received the one talent went away and dug in the earth, and hid his lord’s money.

“Now after a long time the lord of those servants came, and reconciled accounts with them. He who received the five talents came and brought another five talents, saying, ‘Lord, you delivered to me five talents. Behold, I have gained another five talents besides them.’ His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things, I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’

“He also who had received the one talent came and said, ‘Lord, I knew you that you are a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter. I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the earth. Behold, you have what is yours.’

“But his lord answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant. You knew that I reap where I didn’t sow, and gather where I didn’t scatter. You ought therefore to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received back my own with interest. Take away therefore the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will be given, and he will have abundance, but from him who doesn’t have, even that which he has will be taken away. Throw out the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

MATTHEW 25:14–30

A talent is not a coin. It is a weight of silver — six thousand denarii, and a denarius is what the men in the vineyard were paid for a day’s work.

Count that up however you like. The man who received five was handed a fortune. So was the man who received one.

The story is often read as though the third man was hard done by. He was not. He was trusted with more money than he would have seen in a lifetime, and the amounts were not drawn out of a hat – each according to his own ability. The master had assessed them. Nobody in the story was set up to fail.

Two of them go out and trade. The story spends almost no time on this, and neither will I. They do business, they come back with more, they are told well done.

Then the third man, and the first thing he does is describe his master. *I knew you that you are a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter.* Leave that where it lies for the moment. He is not making it up.

In the mid-eighties I was the administrator of a mission and church in Port Moresby.

I had not known the director long. Years later I would have called him my mentor, but that was not where we were then. What I knew of him at the time was that he was hard – very demanding, and I would have said he reaped where he had not sown. He was also gracious.

We were building a house. Iron rods had been set into the wall, and timber beams were to be bolted to them – except the rods were not bolts. They were plain rod. Somebody had to cut threads onto the ends, and to cut threads you need a die.

I was sent to buy one. *Don't come back without it.*

Anyone who was in Port Moresby then will know what that errand was.

There were three major suppliers of building materials in the city, and if a thing was not with one of them it generally was not in the country. I went to all three. None of them had it.

Don't come back without it.

I thought of a smaller supplier, a minor place, and went there, and talked the owner into going out the back and going through his storage himself. He came out with nothing.

That was the morning gone, and I was driving home with the words going round the car.

On the way I passed Niugini Steel. A steel manufacturer, not a shop; they had no reason to sell me anything. I felt prompted to turn in anyway. It was worth a try.

They did not have one to sell.

I had turned to go when I stopped and asked whether they would lend me one, if I left a deposit. They said that was not something they normally did. I explained what the job was and where I had already been. They relented.

What had changed, somewhere between the last shop and that gate, was that I had worked something out. My master could not do anything I could not do. There were no more shops for him either. What he had

actually given me was a problem, and I could either solve it or hand it back.

I drove to the mission and found him, and I did not produce the die.

I told him where I had been. All three suppliers, then the fourth, and the man going through his own storage out the back. I said I had not found anywhere in Port Moresby that would sell me one.

I let that sit.

Then I said I had borrowed one.

He said thanks.

The servant's account of his master is never corrected. The master takes it up and answers out of it — *You knew that I reap where I didn't sow* — and the story lets it stand. What the servant got wrong was not the man. It was what to do about him.

I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the earth. He is the only one who names the fear, and he is also the only one who ends the day holding exactly what he was handed.

I came back with a borrowed die.

Four

He is usually read as lazy. The word in most English Bibles is *slothful*, and it carries a picture of a man who could not be bothered.

But he dug a hole. That is not nothing. He took the bag out to a field, broke ground, put it in, covered it over, and remembered where. Then he lived for however long the master was away knowing exactly where it was and going nowhere near it.

The Greek is *oknēros*, and it sits closer to shrinking than to sleeping. Hanging back. Not willing to move. He was not idle. He was unwilling to be exposed.

And what he did with the money was, by the standards of the day, the careful thing. Burying valuables was ordinary practice — there were no vaults, and a hole in a field that only you knew about was as secure as most things got.

So he did not lose the money and he did not waste it. He protected it. He was condemned anyway.

Then the master says something that changes the shape of the complaint. *You ought therefore to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received back my own with interest.*

That is not a demand that he be clever with it. It is the least he could have done. Take it to the bank, hand it over the counter, and let someone else do the work. He did not even have to do that. Of everything he could have done, he picked the one thing that made sure nothing would happen.

Which tells you what he was actually keeping back. Not the silver. That came home whole, and he made a point of returning it whole. What he withheld was himself.

And look at what the other two are given. Not a payment. More — *I will set you over many things* — and then the buried talent is taken and handed to the man already carrying ten. The reward for having worked is more work, wider ground, heavier trust.

The safe option is the one that is condemned. That is not a comfortable thing to find in the text, and it is there.

Five

Both had the ability to do the thing. Both had the opportunity. Neither did it.

The servant stole nothing. He damaged nothing. He did not spend the money on himself or lose it in a bad venture. He handed it back complete, and he could account for every hour it had been in his care. *You wicked and slothful servant.*

The women outside the door hurt no one either. They did not sabotage the other five. They turned up, they waited, they slept as everyone slept, and they were caught out. Matthew does not call them wicked – he calls them foolish, and that is the word to keep. But look at what the folly was. Oil could be bought. There were dealers, and the wise had been to them. The five who came without it could have gone too.

That is what the two failures have in common. Both had the ability to do the thing. Both had the opportunity. Neither did it.

Nothing was done. That is the whole charge in both cases.

Which is harder than the definition most of us carry. If wickedness means cruelty, most of us are not wicked and can stop thinking about it. If it means having what was needed and not using it, that is a different question, and I cannot answer it as quickly.

Both of these men and women, though, were handed something first. Money to trade, oil to buy. There was a moment when the thing was put into their hands and they knew what it was for.

Which leaves a question the two stories cannot answer between them. What about someone who was never handed anything at all?

Six

“But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. Before him all the nations will be gathered, and he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

“Then the King will tell those on his right hand, ‘Come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry, and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you; or thirsty, and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger, and take you in; or naked, and clothe you? When did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?’ The King will answer them, ‘Most certainly I tell you, because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

“Then he will say also to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you didn’t give me food to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger, and you didn’t take me in; naked, and you didn’t clothe me; sick, and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’

“Then they will also answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and didn’t help you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Most certainly I tell you, because you didn’t do it to one of the least of these, you didn’t do it to me.’ These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

MATTHEW 25:31-46

Notice first that this one is not a parable.

The other two are comparisons. *It will be like ten virgins. It is like a man going into another country.* This one is not like anything. There is a throne, and all the nations gathered in front of it, and a separation. Matthew has changed gear without saying so, and the two stories that came before turn out to have been leading here.

Then the list, and there is nothing religious in it. Hungry. Thirsty. A stranger. Without clothes. Sick. In prison. Six ordinary human situations, all of them physical, none of them requiring belief to notice.

And then the thing that undoes every reading I had brought to it.

Both sides ask the same thing.

The sheep say *Lord, when did we see you hungry, and feed you?* The goats say *Lord, when did we see you hungry ... and didn't help you?* Same question. Same confusion. Neither group recognised what they were looking at while they were looking at it. The people being welcomed are as surprised as the people being sent away.

Which also finishes something the last two stories left hanging.

The servant was handed money. The women were told to bring oil. In both cases something was put into their hands and they knew what it was for. Nobody here was handed anything. There is no entrusted sum in this story and no instruction given in advance – only people who were hungry, and other people who were nearby. And the judgement runs the same way it ran in the other two. They could have. They didn't.

I was preaching this passage in a village in the highlands of PNG on a Sunday morning.

What I was actually talking about was Tasmania. I had come to tell them what God was doing with me in the prison work, and this was the passage I had brought to explain it – *I was in prison, and you came to me*. That was the text that had put me there, and I was standing in front of them saying so.

And somewhere in the middle of it I saw that the sheep did not know.

They are asked when they did it and they cannot answer. They have no record of it. Whatever they had been doing all that time, they had not been doing it as an item, and when the King reads it back to them they do not recognise the account.

I do not remember how I put it, or what I said after it, or whether it made any sense to the people in front of me. What stayed was the thing itself: it was not about what I knew I was doing. It was what I did without knowing.

That is an uncomfortable place to be standing when you are in the middle of explaining your own ministry.

Seven

If the sheep had known, this would be a manageable passage. You could go through the list, check yourself against it, and find out where you stood. Hungry – yes, there was that. In prison – yes, I go. It would be an examination with a result at the end of it.

They did not know. Which means the examination cannot be run. The question can be asked and it cannot be answered, and that is not a flaw in the story.

So: am I a sheep or a goat.

I have been carrying that question since the door shut on the five women. I do not have an answer. I do not think the passage offers me one.

But not knowing the verdict is not the same as being left in the dark.

The signs are all here. Buy the oil. Trade the money. Feed him, visit him, take him in. I am told what to do and I am told what not to do, plainly, and the list is six items long. There is no shortage of direction in this chapter. What is withheld is the finding.

And there is something else, which I did not see until I put the three stories side by side.

Look at what the man at the door actually says. Not *you were late*. Not *you should have bought oil*. He says *I don't know you*.

That is not a mark. It is not a result. Whatever went wrong that night, the sentence at the end of it is about whether these two people know each other, and the answer is no.

Which moves the question I have been asking. *What am I* — sheep, goat, wise, foolish — is a question about me, and I have already said I cannot answer it. *Does he know me* is a question about the two of us, and I cannot answer that one either. But it is the one I can do something about, because being known is not a standing I check. It is something I go after.

That is my aspiration. To know him, and to be known by him. I am not there and I do not have a way of finding out how far along I am. I press on.

Eight

The first time I drove up the hill to the church in Hobart, the first thing I saw was the prison.

It is next door. You come up and it is simply there, before anything else, and then the road bends and the cross on the church comes into view.

And the words arrived. Not audibly, but with a clarity I have not had about many things.

You can no longer say you have not seen me in prison.

This book did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During its development, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words here emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.