

Story about cats and not shutting the door.

I invite you to indulge me a bit and listen to a letter I've written to Keira who is to be baptised this morning. She may not understand it all yet but maybe her parents will read it to her as she grows and understanding will follow.

Dear Keira,

Welcome! Welcome to this Church! Welcome to God's family! I hope you will find here and in any church you visit, love and friendship and concern for your well being. I hope you find a place, a people, where you can be at home, be yourself, and experience God's love and learn the stories of Jesus, and his followers.

What do you think of the story you've just heard? I must say, I find it very difficult. Especially where the so called good guys – the bridegroom and the wise young woman act in such unkind ways. Where is their kindness and compassion? Haven't they heard of the great commandment 'love your neighbour as yourself' or 'do unto others as you would have them do to you?' Haven't they watched Jesus? And then there is the moral of the story 'stay awake' but all the girls fall asleep even the good ones! And it's not very realistic. I mean who starts a wedding reception after midnight? What oil sellers would be open at that time?

So I've been thinking about this story this week and trying to make sense of it. I read an article by Vicky Balabanski, a friend of mine in Adelaide. She says that when Jesus originally told the story, he was probably talking to a group of men. They probably thought it was a comic tale about some young women, and identified themselves with the bridegroom... until the end when they were shocked by the actions of the groom, and wondered if perhaps they who thought they were insiders, were in fact outsiders – giving much food for thought...

Jesus disciples, Vicky says often changed the emphasis of Jesus stories to use them to encourage the infant church. Matthew was writing to Jewish people about the end times which he thought were coming soon. He would have identified Jesus as the bridegroom. He was calling for vigilance ... being ready. The oil in the lamps for Matthew was the oil of faith.

It was urgent to top up, to nurture faith for the difficult time ahead. Your parents, Keira, have brought you here in faith, to ask God's blessing on you, and the gift of God's spirit within you to nurture and sustain you. I've been thinking about my faith and how it is topped up. I think this wonderful community at Holy Covenant helps. We pray for each other and support each other. Spending time each day praying, wasting time with God, reading and mulling over the stories of God's people, meeting with others, going on retreats, walking in the bush, thinking,, being loved, receiving Holy Communion – all these help sustain my faith – What about you little Keira?

The light of the lamps is a symbol of God's presence – a reminder that God is near, like the candle we'll give you after your baptism. The lamp burns bright when the wick is trimmed and there is plenty of oil. When it is dim or goes out – it doesn't

mean God is not there. It means we are not tuned in – not aware of that presence, I think.

Anyway, back to the story. I ask myself, where is compassion, where is grace where is God in this story? What is the good news? Perhaps we need to look further than this storey. Vicky helped me here too. She points out that the word for door is (thura) – the door that is shut in the face of these foolish girls, this same word turns up, right near the end of Matthew's gospel in chapter 27. Here the word describes the stone door (thura) that seals Jesus tomb. Now we know that that shutting is not the last word. The disciples came back and found it open and Jesus risen – alive again, with them. Maybe the shutting is not final. And there is another cause for hope. In John's gospel, the same word thura is used when Jesus says 'I am the door! Knock, and I will open too you' – There is hope, there is compassion for the wise and foolish alike.

Well, what do you make of all this Keira? Jesus is the one who says 'I am the door'(John 10:9) and is present here as liberator and to open the door to the marginalised – people on the edge.

'Only if the closed door became an open one can it enable us to glimpse this Christ as liberator in this story. If it remained shut, then Christ's presence is hidden among there on the outside.'

(Vicky Balabanski in Seasons of the Spirit Congregational life. Pentecost 2 p88 9 November 2008)

Life is what we do while we wait – for the birth of a child, for election results, for the exam, or the exam results, for a new job, for death...

We, you and me, Keira, and everyone here, is invited to attend to God's spirit in us, that anointing oil with which you will soon be anointed; trimming our wicks – trusting, allowing yourselves to be nourished and sustained by the God for whom the closed door is not the last word...