Many moons ago, my parents were the directors of the EYC (Episcopal Young Churchmen, because, of course, we didn’t have names that were inclusive of women then), and I was one of those small children who got carried everywhere on some teen’s shoulders. You may also know that I have a song for just about every occurence. I am a person who loves lyrics. That said, I am a wealth of folksy lyrics from the 60s and 70s. To that end, I cannot read this Gospel without thinking of the song,

“Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning burning burning,

Give me oi in my lamp, I pray. [Hallelujah]

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning, burning, burning,

Keep me burning ’til the break of day.”

Come on and sing Hossnnah, Sing Hosannah, SING HOSSANAH

to the King of Kings…

And then there is the 70s gas shortage version,

Give me gas in my Ford, keep me trucking for the Lord.

Give me gas in my Ford, I pray

Give me gas in my Ford, keep me trucking for the Lord

Keep my truckin’ ’til the break of day.”

And, of course, this is before we knew anything about global warming and the perils of fossil fuel consumption.

And yet, this little song captures our Gospel passage today. As Matthew often does, this Gospel passage relies heavy on metaphor. Jesus likens himself to a very, very delayed bridegroom. I mean, who starts a party at midnight? The bridesmaids, which can be translated either as “bridesmaids” or “virgins”, for in that day and age, the word bridesmaid or virgin essentially meant the same thing, these young women represent the members of the church, or the followers of Jesus. And evidently there are followers and then there are followers. Clearly what counts is that if you are true follower that you are changed. Being a follower of Jesus in name only leaves you without oil when the bridegroom comes. In Hebrew culture of the time and scripture, oil had long been used as a metaphor for righteousness as seen in the psalms, particularly psalm 119, it can also take on other characteristics of our belief—-faith, hope and love.

These characteristics are not only something to which we aspire. The Gospel of John makes it clear that it is through Jesus Christ that we come to know God. This knowledge of what God is—-this is the point. There is no other. The Bible is not just a play book on how to get along with each other. (I mean if one follows the teaching of the Bible it is helpful in terms of getting along with others, but this is not the intention.) All of the Bible is about how to know God. And for Christians, all is important, but it is particularly through the words and action of the Incarnate logos, which is to say through Jesus that we come to know God.

The moral life that Jesus shows us cannot be separated from God. Jesus embodies what this moral life is. Justin Martyr, a second century Christian who passionately defended the Christian moral life, when discussing the virtues of God said that temperance, justice and philanthropy (he used these words rather than faith, hope and love because he was writing to Greeks)— that God IS these virtues. God in Jesus shows us this ethically moral life. We are persuaded by the Incarnate logos, by Christ. And so, at the same time, our doctrine of God and the description of the moral life cannot be separated.

You could also think of it as how Jesus shows us how to have oil in order to attain righteousness and to not lose hope. One learns that God in the world is not only faith, hope and love, but also temperance, justice and philanthrophy. We are to be those things, we are to embody those things. Those are to be our oil. Those are to be our righteousness.

And so along with the other passages today, there is an overarching theme of trusting and hoping in the long arc of God working in the world. There is the questioning of Joshua of the people of Israel asking if they are in fact committed to God. Israel, and so also we, are not to be bound up with foreign gods. No other god—not guns, not power, not money—-should have our attention. God is love, is compassion, is mercy, is justice; to “have oil” for the long haul, is to be bound to this God who IS these things.

Like those in Thessalonika, we are to have hope, knowing that the timing of the bridegroom is somewhat irrelevant, the oil in the lamp is what matters. As the people immediately in time after Jesus had to change their optics as it became clearer that Jesus was not returning the next week, they and we look for the resurrection, but we embody this moral life because the timing of when the bridegroom returns doesn’t matter, it is the life matters. The oil matters.

Generally we don’t like to think about the other part of the story— the bridesmaids who got turned away; perhaps it scares us a little. Perhaps those are the people who just show up at church on a Sunday and go through the motions? We all do it from time to time, even your priest. But it is important not to turn this story in to a story of who’s in and who’s out of heaven. That is not its purpose. God comes to us all and saves us, even the undeserving, and we are ALL the undeserving. In the end, the story’s purpose is an invitation to the banquet. The festivities begin when we enter into the love, and mercy, and justice, and sacrifice or giving back to God. Who wants to miss a great festivity? Good news, for it is GOOD NEWS: God invites us all into that celebration that is the participation in the very life of God. Light your lamps. And give thanks to God.