Sermon: Oil-Ready Lamps

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Nov. 8, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I am glad to hear that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are undergoing a major rearming and restructuring initiative, under federal government's new National Security Strategy, shifting away from small-scale contribution warfare toward full division-level combat readiness. I am reading in the news of impending purchases of new armoured combat support vehicles, rocket systems, submarines, fighter jets, and drones. I read also of increasing pay for the Armed Forces personnel and a renewed effort to recruit more. Neglected for decades by the previous government, Canada has now finally met NATO's 2% GDP defence spending, with the aim of achieving 5% target in the near future.

The need for such a high spending level and combat readiness is made necessary by a world that is increasingly defined by contested border, authoritarian aggression, and acute global threats. Quoting the Prime Minister Mark Carney, "Threats once thought distant are now immediate and proximate. The international rules-based order is under threat. The open global trading system is deeply challenged. What were once strengths—our strong connections and deep integration with other countries—have become vulnerabilities."

When I was younger, I used to think the doctrine of 'Mutual Assured Destruction' as simply downright, you know, mad. You know the infamous military doctrine of nuclear deterrence where superpowers compete to build up their nuclear strike capabilities (both first and second strikes) to the potential complete annihilation of both the attacker and the defender. Yet as I grow older, I come to appreciate at least some of its logic—not the nuclear part, but the part where the readiness of one's armed forces having the inverse relation to the likelihood of ever using it. Preparation and and increasing readiness is the key, that is…the more we are prepared and ready to fight, the less likely others would want to pick a fight with us.

I don't much like the actual fighting part, but we live in a world where vigilance is very much needed as war and prospects of war could all of a sudden be right on our door steps. One doesn't have to go too far to

witness what is happening all across Europe where unknown forces (uhk: Russian) are actively waging a hybrid warfare against that Union. We used to be able to count on our neighbours to the south to come to our collective defence, but with an increasingly volatile political leadership combined with an increasingly baffling foreign policy, it behooves us to get ourselves more prepared, to get ourselves more ready.

There is a different kind of preparation and readiness in our Scripture passage of Matthew 25:1-13, the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. The Parable, taught by Jesus, is simple enough at the first glance. Ten young women took their lamps and went out to meet with the bridegroom. Five went prepared, bringing extra oil with them. The other five, the so called foolish ones did not.The bridegroom was delayed and all of them fell asleep. So by midnight, the wedding party arrived finally. But the foolish five found themselves unprepared, lacking oil. They reached out to ask those five with extra oil to share, but was rebuffed, and was told to "go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves". While they were away, presumedly out buying oil, the bridegroom came and welcomed the lamp-ready five into the wedding banquet.

Later, the other five, supposedly back with oil-ready lamp, came and knocked on the door, but was rebuffed again, this time by the bridegroom saying, "*Truly I tell you, I do not know you.*" Truly I tell you, it is a cringe-worthy parable that makes one wanting to shake that bridegroom, and questioning him, "Where is your humanity? What justice is this?" Is Jesus teaching us 'not to share'? I don't think so, at least I hope not!

The backdrop of this parable is the coming Kingdom of God. We know this because Jesus opens the parable, in verse 1, with "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this." The point of this parable is to be ready for the coming Kingdom. We know this because Jesus closes the parable, in verse 13, with "*Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.*"

The key to discern this parable is to understand what an oil-ready lamp represents. In Exodus 27, and also in Leviticus 24, Moses was told by God to lay out a very specific perpetual ordinance to be observed by the Israelites through all generations—that is to set up a lamp outside the tent of meeting. They were to bring pure oil of beaten olives for the light. Aaron and his sons, that is the priestly class, shall tend it from evening to morning before the Lord. This light shall represent the presence of the Lord in the

tabernacle, and it shall be kept burning regularly, continuously—a perpetual, everlasting flame.

So the best way to understand what an oil-ready lamp means, is to see it as the presence of God in each one of us. That presence is the Spirit of God. It is not a commodity, like oil, that can be readily be bought, sold, traded or shared. It can only be cultivated, individually from within.

The juxtaposition of oil-ready lamp and combat-ready troops creates an interesting synthesis. On an individual level, the Spirit of God moves each one towards faith, that is faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, as our Lord and Saviour. On the collective level, the Spirit moves us towards the Kingdom of God, where it is not so much of a system of governance, but a system of values that illuminates what is worth fighting for. Allow me to name three of these values of justice, human rights and peace.

Justice is the moral and ethical principle of treating individuals and societies fairly, impartially and equally through a rule-based system that is respectfully negotiated by interested parties but also guided by God's Law. The Ten Commandments is a good starting point, but the greatest commandments must be these: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. And love your neighbour as yourself.*" (Matthew 22:36-40) Imagine a global system of justice that is grounded on loving God and loving neighbours. It ain't so bad, isn't it.

Human rights are inherent, universal principles and legal entitlements that belong to every person for simply being human, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion or any other status. From the Judaeo-Christian perspective, this fundamental right derives from God's creation of humanity, in which God breathes the Spirit into us, and in so creating, God saw us as good. What God sees as good, let no one denigrate, especially political leaders who delight in finding scapegoats in order to cast blame on them for societal ills. Beware, be on guard of the yeast of those leaders for their fruits will only lead to further chaos and divisions from within.

Finally, peace. It is more than the absence of conflict or hostility. Peace (or Shalom in Hebrew, or Salaam in Arabic) means reconciliation—reconciled relationships between people and people, between people and God. Astute observers will find the physical shape of a cross as representing such two-fold reconciliations. For indeed, as the Apostle Paul readily reminds and blesses us, in Philippians 4:7, "And the peace of God,

which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your mind in Christ Jesus."

Justice, human rights and peace—that's worth getting ready for and fighting for.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen**.