

Message for Mothers' Union Advent Service

1st December 2025: Matthew 25:

Well Happy New Year everyone! Now don't panic – the oil hasn't run out! We haven't all slept through Christmas and woken up in 2026! But of course in the church calendar, Advent marks the start of a new year so I thought I'd get in early and note that this new year, 2026 is going to be a big, bold and ambitious year for Mothers' Union because of course MU will be celebrating its 150th Anniversary. For those of you joining as new members today then, what a moment, what a fantastic time to join this amazing global movement which unites women, and men, older, younger and everything in between in a community of prayer, of fellowship, of outreach and initiatives around social justice which have a lasting and powerful influence in strengthening family life and in coming alongside the most vulnerable and marginalised with compassionate and concrete support. So this is a good moment to jump in early and say to you all Happy 150th Birthday!

Part of my reason for choosing the Ten Bridesmaids Advent Gospel reading we heard today from Matthew 25 was that Mothers' Union came to my mind when I was recently puzzling over this parable with my friend Maggi, who's a Reader in the diocese of Lichfield, and enlisted my help in some sermon preparation around it (not that she needs it as she's an excellent preacher in her own right). You see, in our discussion around this parable, I kind of wished Mothers' Union was older than 150. I was wishing that MU could be celebrating its 1995th (or thereabouts) birthday, meaning that it would have been around as a movement in Judea/Palestine in Jesus' day, and that part of its ministry would have been support

around good wedding organisation and marriage preparation. Because then, you see, I firmly believe no-one in that wedding banquet scenario would have been left high and dry in terms of essential items they needed, like oil, and consequently no-one would have been left out in the cold or excluded. (Paul, if you're here, I'm certainly wishing and imagining an MU blue bin full of oil into this parable scene). And I'm also absolutely convinced there would have been, not just enough oil, but, equally as important, more than enough tea and cake for everyone involved!

This parable has much to teach us of course about attentiveness, preparedness and readiness – all very fitting themes for the Advent season. There is a sense in which we all have a responsibility to keep our own Christ light well-oiled and burning bright. But that will always happen best when we share that light and hope as a committed community - when we say to one another and to those around us who are fearful, in need, struggling to hold their head above water, grieving or isolated 'I will hold the Christ light for you, and with you, and together let's share the oil we have to keep that light burning brightly and to be ready and able to pass it on to others.'

This kind of prayerful, practical faith-filled support has been woven into the roots of Mothers' Union from its very first beginnings and remains firmly and steadfastly at its heart. It came of course from small beginnings, from a small parish church in Old Alresford in Hampshire, a simple faith-filled step by Mary Sumner who didn't set out to launch a global movement, but just determined to gather women together, regardless of class, circumstance or status and the rest as they say is history – 150 years on 4 million members across 84 countries. So what might God inspire as the next small

step for us, in our parishes and elsewhere, in this 150th anniversary year to come?

Whether it's the regular branch meetings offering warmth and friendship, the Members at Home Ministry, the promotion of stable and secure family life, support for families in crisis, Away from it All day trips and holidays, support for those in prison and their families, blue bin support for the homeless, raising awareness and speaking out for those who suffer gender-based violence through domestic abuse or in whatever form - and the list could and does go on, the ministry of Mothers' Union is as well-oiled, as vital and vibrant as it has ever been and long may it continue to thrive and grow.

So I hope we're all approaching this 150th anniversary celebration with thankfulness for that lively torch flame which has been handed on to us as Mothers' Union's lasting legacy, and also with that Advent-style sense of expectation, anticipation and faith fuelled excitement about all that is to come, playing our part in keeping the oil levels of prayer, enthusiasm, generosity, meeting and sharing together in committed community, high, so that, through our involvement in Mothers' Union at whatever level, we'll be making that open invitation and giving that encouragement, as in the words of Christina Rossetti's beautiful Advent Sunday poem based on this very parable:

'Behold, the Bridegroom cometh: go ye out (Mothers' Union at 150)

With lighted lamps and garlands round about

To meet Him in a rapture and a shout.'

Revd. Gail Phillip (St Giles Church, Exhall)

