

keep awake!

a sermon preached on the
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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Joshua 24:1-3a; Psalm 78: 1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-18; Matthew 25:1-13

The Parable which we have just heard from St Matthew's Gospel, is one the more difficult passages to understand in this Gospel. Indeed, every preacher's heart sinks when they discover that this is the Gospel reading for the day, because it is such a difficult passage.

The main reason it is difficult is that we are not actually sure what is going on here. We do not fully understand the social setting or the wedding customs. We call it these days 'The Parable of the 10 Bridesmaids' (rather than the old-fashioned title of 'The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins' in the King James Version) but we do not actually know that they were bridesmaids. That's an attempt to understand it in our own terms. But we do not actually know.

They are obviously part of the wedding party, but they seem as much associated with the bridegroom as the bride. Their role seems to be to lead the procession of the wedding party into the wedding banquet - probably held in the bridegroom's house. That would explain why they need the lamps.

There has also been some delay in the wedding celebrations, a delay that goes on for hours – which is another strange feature: much longer than the bride turning up a bit late for church! But it's the bridegroom who is delayed, not the bride.

So why is he delayed? The Parable does not inform us. It is possible that he is delayed by some kind of haggling between the families over the bride-price, the dowry. But whatever the reason, the girls are kept waiting outside and need to keep their lamps alight.

By 'lamps' we are probably talking here about torches dipped in olive oil to keep them alight. Some of the girls have brought just enough oil for the time they expect to wait; while the others (the prudent and more practical ones) have very sensibly brought extra oil just in case there is a delay. Meanwhile, all the girls are dozing off as they wait.

When they hear that the bridegroom is at last coming, half the girls have run out of oil because of the long delay, and the other half won't share because they only have enough for themselves. Some of the girls, therefore, run off to try and buy more oil; and they miss out, because the bridegroom turns up when they are gone.

So, this is a strange story for us, based on customs we either do not understand or can only vaguely guess.

At the same time, the Parable is difficult for us because it seems so harsh. Given that the bridegroom would have known all ten girls – their names, their families – and perhaps even had a say in the choice of these girls, it is odd that he denies knowing five of them when they knock on the door: ‘I never knew you’, he says to them.

Also, given the strong emphasis on hospitality in the ancient world – and the generous attitude of the hosts at weddings – it is odd that the bridegroom won’t open the door for them. They are banished from the wedding banquet because they neglected to bring enough oil. All-in-all, you might even end up feeling sorry for these thoughtless, impractical girls, and wonder if the bridegroom is not a bit hard on them.

These difficulties make us wonder whether we can find any message in the Parable for us today. What is Matthew actually saying here? What’s he doing in this rather odd (to us) and even disturbing story?

To answer that question, we need to set the Parable in its wider context in Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew 24 and 25 together form the last discourse in Matthew’s Gospel, the last of the five sermons throughout the Gospel. The first of these is the Sermon on the Mount. In this, the last one, Matthew is speaking on the theme of the future coming of the kingdom of heaven. That is his focus and that, in the end, is what the Parable is about. It is about the advent of the heavenly Bridegroom, the coming of God’s kingdom.

The context, in other words, helps to find the meaning of the Parable; helps us to draw something from it. And it is particularly appropriate for us in these last weeks of the Church’s year, when we focus on the future kingdom of God, the sovereign and gracious rule of God, which comes to a climax in the Feast of Christ the King.

Matthew’s main point in telling the Parable is to encourage us to be prepared for that coming kingdom; to keep awake. The previous section of this last discourse has Jesus telling his disciples to ‘keep awake’ for the future coming of the Son of Man. And Matthew reiterates that message here in the Parable.

Of course, in our story, the focus is not on keeping awake literally – after all, every girl, sensible or foolish, dozes off as she awaits the bridegroom. But Jesus is speaking metaphorically: about being spiritually alert, spiritually prepared.

So, what does it mean for us to be prepared for the coming kingdom of God and for the return of Christ, as Paul speaks of it in 1 Thessalonians? What does it mean for our church, for this parish, for our own personal lives?

In the first place, the Parable encourages us to have and to nurture a kingdom consciousness or dimension to our lives. It is all too easy for us to become complacent with our lives or to become so absorbed in our everyday concerns that we forget about anything else. Yes, even in our church’s life, we need this same reminder – even as Christians.

It’s not ‘business-as-usual’ for us or for the church. We have a calling to watch, to wait, to look out for, to long for, to pray for, the coming kingdom of heaven.

Our first reading from Joshua is a warning about the dangers of living without God, of making the ordinary things of our lives – the people we love, our careers, our possessions – into gods, into idols that we worship. Many people in our society live like that: as if what they now have

is all there is – their jobs, their families, their friends. Even some Christians do. But for us there is always that other dimension, that other awareness, which comes before everything else and which shapes everything else.

We believe as Christians that God will one day re-make the world, re-make creation. We believe that God is already doing so in Christ. And we await its fulfillment, we live in hope, in joy, in expectation that God's kingdom *will* come, that God's name *will* be hallowed, that God's will *will* be done: so that earth can truly mirror heaven.

We, of all people, cannot be complacent, we cannot risk idolatry, we cannot be so taken up with the daily round of our lives that we forget the kingdom. It is like a horizon, if you like, that encircles our lives, and we need to lift up our heads and gaze on that horizon again and again. Or it is like a magnet that is already drawing us into the future, into God's future, and we need to resist the impulse to fight against it. If only we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear!

Matthew is not saying, incidentally, that our everyday concerns are unimportant. On the contrary, our families, our friends, our work, our tasks, are all God's gifts to us. And in the incarnation, when God became one of us in Jesus Emmanuel, God entered into those everyday lives: Jesus came to live our life and to die our death.

Yet we need to live our ordinary lives with awareness of the extraordinary that calls to us, that invites us into God's future; that is always there, impinging on us, knocking at our doors, ready to guide us, to illuminate us, to transform us, to lighten our load.

And the more we open ourselves to that kingdom, the more authentically we live our human lives in the here-and-now, the less we live in an idolatrous way that puts untold burdens on those people, those things, that we love. God does not desire us to become less human - to waft around on the clouds - but rather to become more human, more fully and truly engaged in our human lives - but always with the perspective of eternity.

And God does not desire us to be swamped with the cares of our lives, to become burdened with anxiety and dread for the future. God is our future. Christ is our future, the one who will come to meet us out of the future.

'Seek first the kingdom of God', Jesus says elsewhere in Matthew, 'and all these things will be added to you.'

That's part of what Matthew means when he tells us to be prepared and to keep awake: maintaining that kingdom consciousness in our lives.

The other aspect to being prepared for the coming kingdom of God is that we are called to share in the work of the kingdom. The truth is that God does not actually need our help in bringing about the kingdom. But God chooses to work through us and with us, in Christ. God calls us to be co-workers in the vineyard of the kingdom.

We do not just sit back and say, God will sort it all out. It is partly true, that we can totally and entirely trust God to make all things well. But God wants us to be involved, graciously invites us to work for the kingdom – the kingdom which is still to come but is already in our world, already transforming us.

Working for the kingdom engages us in mission: in working to show forth, to display, to proclaim God's goodness, God's generosity and mercy, God's love for all creation – the same goodness and mercy which are embodied, above all, in Jesus himself. We are to work for that divine justice and that mercy in every aspect of our lives, and the church's life and the life of the world. That is the other part of what Matthew means by 'being prepared'.

The Parable of the Ten Girls, for all its strangeness, proclaims the coming of the kingdom of heaven, a kingdom that will one day replace all the idolatrous and unjust kingdoms of the earth. As it is in heaven – that place of love and light and goodness and generosity – so it will be on earth.

This morning, the gospel calls us to be like those sensible and prudent girls who look around them, who see more than others see, who live in hope and expectation for the coming of the heavenly Bridegroom, who prepare themselves joyfully for that coming.

As Paul and Matthew assure us in our readings this morning, Christ will one day return, though we do not know how. In the meantime he comes to us now, today, in bread and wine, in his body and blood, in the holy Eucharist. Here we celebrate what Christ has done for us and for our world in the past, and what Christ will do for us and for our world in the future.

We are to live with this hope, this perspective, illuminating our lives and the lives of those around us. And we are called to labour with God in creation to make real that gracious and benign heavenly kingdom revealed in Christ, that kingdom which summons all to the banquet, which welcomes all who are prepared for it, all who truly long for it and hope for it.