

stay awake!

a sermon preached on the

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at

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ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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Genesis 15: 1-6; Psalm 33; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12: 32-40

Hugh McKay is an Australian thinker, social researcher and writer whose latest book is about faith and religion in modern Australia. At a recent conversation about the book, which is called *Beyond Belief*, Hugh was encouraging his audience to have the courage to take up what he called “the quest of searching for the meaning of our own lives”. As part of that challenge, Hugh said the following:

. . . I should say that not everyone wants a meaningful life. There are plenty of Australians today who are settling on a kind of meaningless life based on materialism, on consumerism. And if you doubt whether Australians are in the grip of that extraordinary pursuit, just take a look at our record levels of personal and household debt as we've been encouraged to buy, buy, buy in order to give some materialistic meaning to our lives. And if having bought, bought, bought we don't feel as if our lives have acquired meaning, that just means we haven't bought enough, so borrow and spend some more, and that's indeed what we are doing. (in Dumbo Feather, 48:p18)

Sometimes church people can take a rather high-minded attitude to those who are focused on acquiring things, but it seems to me that we are, all of us, touched by the culture we grow up in . . . it's worth, I think, spending an honest moment, asking ourselves how far we are caught up in life as acquisition, whether that be acquisition of goods, or experiences, or admirable character traits or badges of honour: any of those things that Jesus might describe as “purses that wear out”.

I would suggest that valuing everything according to its cash value has become pretty pervasive. How many times do we marvel at how much a work of art is worth? – rather than marvel at the technique or the colour or the insight of the artist? I had a discussion with a couple of year 8 students the other day about whether or not you can buy learning, purchase an education. It took a while for them to decide that you can buy learning opportunities, but you can't actually buy learning, a great relief to me that they reached that conclusion! I have also recently heard people talking about “buying memories” (which means paying for some experience that will hopefully be memorable!)

A couple of weeks ago when David explored Luke's story of Martha and Mary, he pointed out that the issue for Martha was not so much her desire to have everything right for her visitor, but her distractedness. And it seems to me that this is Hugh Mc Kay's point as well – the consumerism, the materialism, the anxiety about whether we are acquiring all the goods and experiences we need to be happy, (I do include experiences as well here, it's not just about stuff)– all of this makes us distracted; we are so caught up in it all, that we don't choose to attend to deeper questions, to come to grips with the real challenges of life, to make space for God to speak to us . . . To use another image, borrowed from our gospel reading today - we can end up sleeping our way through life, living but not really

living, being carried along by the tide of what our culture says we desire, and what milestones we should be getting under our belts.

In our gospel today Luke's Jesus says to his disciples that they need to:

*Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; **be like those** who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him **as soon as** he comes and knocks . . .*

And especially, Jesus says, be like those particularly "blessed slaves" who are still waiting, conscious and alert, *in the middle of the night, or near dawn.*

The question we need to ask about this call to be "dressed for action" is why? Why does Luke's Jesus here encourage his disciples to have their lamps lit and stay awake? What are the consequences of not being lit up and alert?

When I was in my teens I listened to a few popular Christian songs – and there is one that I always remember when reading these passages from Scripture about **being ready** when the master arrives. The lyrics were something like:

Two men walking up a hill, one disappears and one's left standing still, I wish we'd all been ready; there's no time to change your mind the Son has come and you've been left behind.

It had a catchy tune that song, but while the tune was catchy, the lyrics worried me. They seemed to suggest a god who swiftly leaves behind those of us who are not "ready". Is this how it really is? Does God require me to prove my worth as his daughter, by not giving in to sleepiness? Does God intend to disown anyone who gives in to human frailty, to instinct, to the desire to be put your head down for a little while?

So, what does our gospel say about the point of being "awake" and staying awake?

Is it that the master wants the slaves to stay awake so that when he returns home, they will be able to service his every need? This makes perfect sense, given what we know of masters and servants – but it's absolutely not there in Luke. The only thing that the slaves need to do when the master returns is "*open the door for him*". What happens next reverses our normal expectations – the master fastens his belt, ushers everyone to sit down at the table, and then serves them a meal: it is the master who serves the slaves and not the other way round. This is one of Luke's great insights – that whenever we make the effort to offer hospitality to God, we suddenly discover ourselves on the receiving end of divine hospitality.

Our gospel today asks us to examine the extent to which we are awake to the presence of God in our lives, awake to the eternal significance of each of our lives. It is a passage that confronts us with a reality: that if we are sleeping through our lives – in other words – if we are too distracted to attend to deeper questions, then we will not be able to experience the thing that really gives us meaning, wholeness & healing: namely, God in Christ loving us, God in Christ taking great pleasure in "giving us the kingdom".

This is not to say that we should disdain material things – God saw everything he made and said it was good – the material things of life are to be enjoyed . . . but I think Hugh McKay's observation shows us that we are in danger of investing material things with a significance they do not, and cannot, have. If we are hoping that shoes, bags, houses, cars, holidays, qualifications, achievements, status reputation, will bring us to a place of blessed tranquillity, we are going to be disappointed.

This is also not to say that we can somehow manage ourselves into wakefulness and not being distracted, as if there is a manual we can follow in order to stay conscious & upright.

But . . . we can spend some effort on questions like: where is my life focused? In what direction am I heading?

And rather than take refuge in some indulgence or other, we can ask God to help us face the things we are afraid to face. I remember a nun I once studied under saying to the class I was in: “Some nights it’s fine to go home, sit in front of the TV and relax . . . but there are other nights when the TV needs to stay off and we need to face a problem.”

And, we can direct ourselves, by force of will and deep desire, to be involved in the things that the Church has always been involved in:

listening to Scripture,

being present in silence and prayer and worship,

taking the sacrament,

noticing the stranger,

caring for the widows and the prisoners,

taking ourselves seriously as people made in the image of God . . . examining ourselves and attending to the ordinary business of everyday, with the expectation that deep within the mundane details of our lives, we will find the presence of God.

These are the habits that might bring us to discover the one true God: not a god who will only deign to reach out and touch us when we have passed the test of staying awake . . . but the God who meets us at the point of our greatest shame and who so fervently wants to shower us with love and meaning. To that God, whose “*good pleasure [it is] to give us the kingdom*” be all glory and praise.