

Remembrance Sunday

Darkness and delay

I thought that it was the bride who was usually late for weddings, and I've stood by many a sweating bridegroom while the minutes ticked by with no sign of his beloved. Yet here in our story from Matthew it's the groom who keeps everyone waiting. In London where I once ministered and where time-keeping had a tendency to be a little loose there was a vicar who used to penalise couples by docking off hymns: 15 minutes late and you lost one hymn, and so on. So sometimes there were no hymns at all! Weddings in Jesus' day, however, were different. Evidently what happened was that the bridegroom and bride each gathered at their own homes and at the right time, often well into the night, the bridegroom went to the house of the bride who had been waiting and who now came forth with her bridesmaids. The whole company then proceeded back to the groom's house where the wedding ceremony was celebrated and, in due course, late in the night, the marriage was consummated.

Now, there are certain features of this story that strike us immediately. For a start there is perhaps a kind of a tension or contrast between the two symbols of wedding and night. A wedding of course is a joyful occasion. It is a time of celebration and merriment. And yet outside the warmth and glow of the wedding party it is dark, and darkness has overtones of threat and danger and fear. And here in this story it is the darkness that causes the problem. Darkness requires that the bridesmaids have light, and light requires oil for their lamps, and this brings us to another crucial feature of this story. There has been a delay. The bridegroom has been held up. The minutes and the hours have passed and the bride and her maids have grown listless and tired and they've fallen asleep and all the while the lamps have been flickering. And now, just as the groom arrives, some are about to go out.

So there follows the separating out of the wise and the foolish maidens – those who are ready and those whose oil has run out, and who find the door closed in their faces. And the story leaves us with this question, are you ready? Are you prepared? The wise bridesmaids in the story are described in verse 10 as 'those who were ready', but that raises a deeper question which is, ready for what? What were these wise bridesmaids ready for? Well, one answer would be

that they – unlike the foolish maidens – were ready for the arrival of the groom. And that might tempt us to preach a sermon about the importance of being ready for Jesus, ready for Jesus' return. Only that would be wrong, because the issue here is not in fact preparedness or otherwise for the bridegroom. It's not about being ready for Jesus. No, what separates the bridesmaids is that the wise ones were ready, not for the groom, but for the delay. Think about it. Both the wise and the foolish maidens were fast asleep when the groom arrived. It's not as if some were awake and on tip-toe while others were not. No. They were all asleep, all dead to the world. But the difference between them is that some had come prepared for the delay. Some had enough oil to sustain them for the long wait, while others did not.

And here surely we begin to get to grips with this parable.

What is it about? Well, it's about delay and darkness. And it's about the need for resources to sustain us while we wait in the dark. That is the issue that this story addresses to us: we who try to follow the Christian faith. Indeed that is the issue that faced the first audience to whom this passage was written, for they faced the troubling fact of a delay. You see, it seems clear from this and other stories that the early Christian believers thought that the Jesus who had been taken from them would return soon. The end of the world, the day of the Lord, was just around the corner and they just needed to hang on faithfully until the end. But now they were experiencing a delay. This is the background to our reading from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. There seem to have been people in Thessalonica who had thought that they wouldn't actually die because the Lord would return in their life-time. The game was almost up! But now the days were passing – and no sign of Jesus. Some of the Thessalonians had died, and people were beginning to realise that they had to settle down for the long haul. But furthermore, not only were they facing delay, they were facing darkness as well, specifically the darkness of persecution and opposition that would strive to extinguish the light of faith. So how were they to keep going? How were they to keep their lamps burning? What reserves of oil did they have to sustain them?

And these are questions that face Christians in every age, for we all face the reality of delay. You see, as Christians we believe that there will be an end to this strange pageant that we call history, with all its triumphs and its tragedies. We believe in the joy that is to come. We believe that finally, at last, God's creation will be pictured truly not as an arena where the powerful fight it

out at the expense of the powerless. We believe that finally, at last, God's creation will be pictured truly not as a vale of tears and groaning and pain. We believe that finally, at last, God's creation will be pictured truly not as a wasteland of pollution and destruction and the death of eco-systems. We believe that finally, at last, God's creation will be pictured truly as a wedding party where we feast and dance and the night gives way to dawn. But for now all that is delayed. Where is it? And there is not only delay but darkness, and oil can be scarce and it can be hard to keep our lamp lit and burning.

Let's just consider the darkness. Today is Remembrance Sunday when we recall the horrors of war that have consumed the earth, not least in the past century or so. And to remember is painful because memories are evoked of genocide and holocaust and occupation and slaughter and innocents and children slain. But of course for many what perished in the mud of the trenches 100 years ago and what bleeds out of every victim of war is not just life, but faith – faith in a good and loving God. Recall those words that we quoted earlier, from Herbert Read's 'Meditation of a dying German officer', with its imagery so appropriate to today's reading. 'This failing light is the world's light: It dies like a lamp flickering for want of oil...' The world's light is failing in the night of barbarism and what is flickering for want of oil is not just the light of life but the light of faith. How do we believe in God in the face of the obscenity of war? How do we sustain faith in the darkness of human brutality and cruelty? How do we hold onto God in the cold night of war and inhumanity? How is faith sustained in the darkness of what is happening today in Iraq and Syria and elsewhere?

And of course there are other nights besides war. There is other darkness. Living as we do in an increasingly secular world, at least in this neck of the woods where our Christian faith is being eclipsed, how do we keep our lamp burning? And of course there is too that other darkness, the personal darkness that we may encounter in our lives: the traumas and the tragedies that befall us and that leave our faith like a smouldering, smoking wick. And the question this passage asks is what is going to keep you going? Have you oil enough to sustain you? Have you resources enough to persevere through the long dark night?

It's hard to read this story of the wise and foolish maidens without thinking of Samuel Beckett's famous play, *Waiting for Godot*. Here two men wait by the side of the road for a character named Godot and we are not told

why they are waiting or even who Godot is but clearly he has been delayed, and there is an inevitable association between Godot and God. And throughout the play both characters consider abandoning their vigil. But at one point one of the characters says something very significant. He says, 'Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come.' And after a pause, he continues, 'We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment.' And I find those lines utterly inspiring! We are waiting, waiting in the delay, waiting in this immense confusion, with war and suffering crashing around us, sometimes in the dark, sometimes in the face of unbelief, and we are not saints and sometimes our faith is poor and our flame flickering. But we keep our appointment - and let me tease out what that might mean.

You see, no parable told by Jesus can tell the whole story. It can never be the whole truth. And the problem with this story of the wise and foolish maidens is that it pictures them waiting for the groom to come, and while they wait he is absent. He is somewhere on the other side of town in his own house. But this is where the story breaks down because in reality the groom comes to us – even while we wait. Even in the midst of the delay he comes. And it is in meeting with him that our faith is sustained and we are given strength to hold on. This is how we 'keep the appointment' in the dark and the delay. It's how we keep the lamp lit.

I'm reminded here of the beautiful English word 'tryst', as when we speak of a lovers' tryst, by which we mean a lovers' meeting or rendezvous, and maybe in the context of this story about a wedding that is a good word to use. There are these appointed trysting places where the bridegroom meets us his beloved. And surely worship is one such place, the prime place. Here where God's Word is shared and praise is offered, where prayer is raised and bread is broken and wine shared, here is an appointed tryst. And as we keep the appointment our lamps are refilled. And Jesus would tell us that another trysting place is to be found amidst the poor and the oppressed, the suffering and the dispossessed. Here too we keep the appointment with Jesus. And all this requires of us discipline. It requires of us that we recognise that there are these appointed places where Jesus meets us and without them we easily falter and our oil runs out and sooner or later the door of faith closes. And I wonder where your particular trysting places with Jesus are, where you keep the appointment

So no, we are not saints, but we keep our appointment. And we find that our faith is kept alive in the delay and in the darkness, and that there is enough oil to keep our sometimes flickering flame alight. Amen.

O gracious, peace-making God,
Today we keep our appointment with the dead,
The fallen, those who have died in conflicts.
And we bring before you today our war-torn world,
where the strident din of hatred and conflict
drowns out the sighs of peace and
the whispers of reconciliation.
We think of the conflicts between Muslims,
and between Muslims and Christians,
and between Palestinian and Israeli
and of civil wars within nations.
And we think of the effects of wars –

of refugees and refugee camps and asylum seekers,
and the maimed and the disfigured...

We pray, God, for the United Nations,
that it may be a force for peace.

We pray for world leaders that they may act wisely
and justly and for the good of all.

And we pray for those who bear arms on behalf of the nation,
That they may have discipline and discernment,
courage and compassion.

And we pray for our enemies, for those who wish us harm,
That you will turn the hearts of all towards kindness and friendship.

We pray for the wounded and the bereaved,
that in their trials they may know your love and support.

Most holy and gracious God,
hear our prayers for all who strive for peace
and all who fight for justice.

Help us, who today remember the cost of war
to work for a better tomorrow;
and as we commend to you lives lost in terror and conflict,
bring us all, in the end, to the peace of your presence;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.