

Matthew 25:1-13; Joshua 24:1-3a,14-25

12.11.17

The bridesmaids' world

I thought it was the bride who was usually late for the wedding. Many is the time that I have waited with an anxious groom as the minutes ticked by and there was still no sign of his beloved. Indeed people say that it is the bride's prerogative to be late for her wedding. Well, in the passage we read this morning from Matthew's Gospel it is the groom who is keeping everyone waiting. The story reflects the customs of the time. Evidently what happened then was that the bridegroom and bride each gathered at their own home 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.

Well, in this story told by Jesus everyone is waiting. The groom has been delayed. And it may be that in the original telling of the story Jesus was addressing the Jews of his day who had been waiting a long time for God to do something, to send a Messiah who would raise them up as a nation and deliver them from the oppressive empires who had ruled them for so long. And Jesus was warning them that God had now acted, that the Messiah had come and they were in danger of missing it, of not being ready with their lights burning. Or it may be that Jesus is talking not about his first coming but his second, his return at the end of time, when God will bring the curtain down on this old order and make all things new. And on this reading Jesus is warning his followers that there is going to be a long wait before this happens. The early Christians evidently believed that Jesus' return would take place very soon, that this world had a very limited shelf-life. This story, however, warns that history will be a long haul and we're going to need all the resources we can muster to keep our lights burning in what will often be dark times.

So there are two readings of the passage and maybe we need both. Maybe the story is multi-layered. Maybe it spoke to the original hearers about God's coming to them in Jesus after a long wait, but also speaking to us of God's coming again in Christ after another long delay. But either way I want us this morning, on the Remembrance Sunday, to think a bit about the world that

is pictured in this story – what kind of a world it is. Because this is our world, a world in some ways drastically different from the one Jesus addressed 2000 year ago yet also one that is very much the same – for surely, there is nothing new under the sun.

And the first thing to note is that the world of the story is a strange mixture. On the one hand there is joy, for a wedding is taking place and that is a joyful occasion. Love is in the air, a love so strong that it wants to make promises and commitments. And a wedding is also an occasion for community, when people come together with goodwill and celebration. And all that speaks of the joy of human life, of gift and of blessing. Yet the story is set at night, in the dark, when oil is needed to bring light. And that means that along with love and goodness and truth and beauty there is also darkness. And today especially on this Remembrance Sunday we think of the darkness of war and how it manifests today – not only, as it once did, in the deaths of combatants and soldiers on the battlefields, but now so often in the appalling suffering of civilians. From the shadows of our world there stare at us the faces of refugees and those displaced by war, and the victims of terrorist bombs and lorries driven into crowds. This is how the darkness descends today – as well as among those dressed in uniform. So the world of the story then and now is mixed, pictured by a wedding in the dark, a world battered and bruised and shamed - yet still holding with love and dignity and joy. And we can't help wondering which will have the last word. Will human history finally culminate in a wedding or in all – or in all-encompassing darkness?

Then secondly, as well as the world of the story being a mixture, it is one where the bridesmaids are waiting, waiting for something to happen – whether it's the first coming of the Messiah or the second. And waiting renders you passive. It means that you are not in charge, that you are at the mercy of forces beyond your control. So the groom arrives suddenly, at an unknown moment, and the foolish bridesmaids are caught out, unready. But in the unpredictable world we live in it could have been other things beside the bridegroom that caught them napping – a sudden death, a sudden loss, a sudden catastrophe. That is the world we live in, where despite human ingenuity and mastery of so much we are still vulnerable to so much that lies beyond our control. We are continually taken by surprise.

So, there is a narrative of our world's recent history which is often recounted, a narrative about the unforeseen and the unexpected and what is

beyond our control and it goes something like this. Go back to 1989 and the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union and of Communism. Latterly that might perhaps have been foreseen, but nevertheless it came as a surprise and caused huge upheaval. It famously prompted a political philosopher called Francis Fukuyama to write a book called 'The End of History and the Last Man'. In it he argued that the triumph of free market capitalism and liberal democracy was now complete and final, and in this sense history was over. It had reached its end, its fulfilment, and the West had won. Globalization – the remaking of the entire world in the image of the global free market - would reign supreme. This was an evolutionary end-point and now at last we were in control of the future. Of course, this was a very western perspective and as such very limited and it was soon revealed to be specious. Along came 9/11 – a catastrophic shock - with the targeting of symbols of the free-Market, capitalist world; and suddenly we were confronted by the rise of militant Islam and caught up in a war on terror; and then out of the blue came the global financial collapse; and then the surprise of the Arab Spring; and then the refugee crisis and suddenly history seems anything but settled and resolved. No-one could have foreseen all this in the heady days after 1989. Suddenly the world is an unpredictable and unstable place once again.

Indeed on this occasion we are reminded that the 1st World War was supposed to be 'the war to end all wars' - a sick joke considering that the 20th century that followed was the most bloodthirsty in human history. In a capricious world we do not control these things. The British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was once asked what it was that blew governments off course, to which he reputedly replied, 'events, dear boy, events.' And clearly we are not in control of events. In the aftermath of the fall of the USSR and the end of the Cold War the danger of nuclear conflagration seemed to have lessened – who would have anticipated that in recent months two nations would be threatening each other with nuclear war, one warning that it could 'totally destroy' the other? And if it's not nuclear war that gets us there are plenty of other threats. In just this past week the great scientist Stephen Hawking has predicted that a combination of overcrowding and energy consumption means that the human race has less than 600 years before it is engulfed by a ball of fire. And we seem powerless to prevent it. Hawking's only solution is to migrate to other planets: who would have foreseen that?

Such is the worrying, ambiguous world we live in. Poised between light and darkness, between war and peace, the future is in the balance. Will it be triumph or disaster? Progress or annihilation? And we do not seem to be in control but at the mercy of events, powerless to deal with the consequences of our own actions.

So we return to our passage, to this story Jesus told us. And here we are reminded of basic, foundational truths that we need to hear again on this Remembrance Sunday. Firstly, the story tells us that despite the darkness, despite our folly, despite our addiction to violence, the future is secure - and it is pictured not as a funeral but as a wedding. History ends not with a bang or a whimper but with a party! So there is no final ambiguity or uncertainty. The image of the wedding means that love wins in the end - and therefore peace triumphs over war, ploughshares over swords. And we are summoned therefore to live in the winning side: to be bold in love, to be strong in peace-making, to align ourselves with truth and goodness and beauty. These endure. And as regards our lack of control, our helplessness before a threatening world - well, we believe in a God who in Christ has triumphed over the very worst we could throw at him, has defeated it, and who rules over all. And we may be at the mercy of events, but God is not: the bridegroom knows the days and the times. He comes when he wills and he has the power to open and to shut doors.

It's interesting, but there is one figure who is missing in this story Jesus told. The bridesmaids are there, and the groom, but where is the bride? Not only is she not the one who is late, she doesn't even get a mention. She is marginal in the narrative. Well, of course, in the New Testament the Church is the bride - the bride of Christ. And we might ask what our place is in the story. What is the church's place in the wider story, the story of the world, a story in which we seem in this part of the world to be becoming more and more marginal? Well, our role as bride is to direct people to the groom - to tell not of us but of him. So in an uncertain and ambiguous world poised between light and darkness our role is to keep our lamps lit, bearing witness to the light. And in a world often passive before unfolding events our role is to proclaim and to bear witness and to celebrate that Jesus is Lord of all. And there is no better day for the bride to be reminded of her responsibilities to the groom than Remembrance Sunday. Amen.