

Matthew 25: 1-13

08.11.20

Remembrance Sunday

Waiting and sustaining

I thought that it was the bride who was usually late for weddings, and I've stood by many a sweating groom while the minutes ticked by with no sign of his beloved. Yet here in our story from Matthew's Gospel it's the groom who keeps everyone waiting and the story reflects the wedding customs of Jesus' day. 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 festivities followed.

Well, in this story told by Jesus everyone is waiting because 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 Jesus could be interpreted as 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 would return soon. But gradually it became clear that this was not to be, that history would be a long haul and that Christians would need all the resources they could muster to keep the light of faith burning in what would often be dark times. So there are two readings of the story and maybe we need both. Maybe it spoke to the Jews of Jesus' day about God's coming to them in the Messiah, while also speaking to later Christians about Christ's coming again.

In either case, however, the story is about waiting and it's about being ready. The question, however, is 'ready for what?' And the obvious answer is, 'ready for the groom!' Ready for his arrival! And on that reading the wise bridesmaids would have been awake and prepared for the groom's arrival, while the foolish ones would have been fast asleep. But that's not how the story goes. Actually, both sets of bridesmaids are asleep when the groom arrives – none of them are ready. The difference between them, though, is that some were ready and prepared for the groom's delay. They had oil enough to see them through the long hours, while the foolish ones did not. While all the bridesmaids were waiting for the groom, only some had the resources necessary to keep their light burning. So the message of this story is not, are you ready for Jesus? but do you have what it takes to sustain faith in difficult times, in times of darkness when faith might easily falter? And let's face it, in the world we live in that is not easy.

Today we remember the terrible scourge of war that has afflicted this world since time immemorial. How do you keep faith alive in a world that tears itself apart and when brutality towards our fellow humans knows no limits? How did soldiers in the 1st World War in the hell of the trenches keep believing in God? Well, the straight answer is that many didn't. For many the that war sounded the death knell for the conviction that God is in his heaven and all is well on earth, and that war was one of the factors that contributed to the rise of secularism in the 20th century and the decline in belief in Christian civilisation. Quite apart, however from our self-inflicted inhumanity to one another, there are other reasons why faith easily falters. How do you sustain faith in the face of tragedy: the loss of a loved one, or a cancer diagnosis? Or to bring it right home to today, how do you sustain faith in a time of pandemic, when we are waiting, waiting for an end to this massive disruption?

Well, there are no easy answers, but let's look more closely at our story and consider particularly the setting, which is night. It is dark, and darkness symbolises absence. The groom is not present. The bridesmaids await his arrival, and waiting makes us profoundly vulnerable. When

we are waiting we are not in control. We are at the mercy of what is beyond us, and that instils in us deep insecurity and fear. This is what is so frightening about this virus – we are waiting for an end to it, waiting for a vaccine, and we look to the scientists and to medical research but we feel helpless: how long O Lord?

It brings to mind that period of darkness in Israel's history that is the setting for our reading from the prophet Jeremiah: what we call the exile, in the 6th century BC, when Jerusalem was in ruins and many citizens had been taken away to captivity in Babylon. People were fearful, and they were asking, how long O Lord? And our reading from Jeremiah echoes the story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, for Jeremiah describes the exile as a time when there are no weddings and the light of the lamp is banished. As he surveys the signs of death all around him Jeremiah says that God will 'banish...the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp....' This verse repeats almost exactly two earlier verses in Jeremiah, and with the imagery of weddings and lamps, perhaps Jesus had these passages in mind when he told his story. But Jesus' story of course is different, for while it is set in darkness there is nevertheless a wedding taking place. The groom is on his way. The ceremony will soon begin and whatever fear and anxiety the darkness might hold, it is the joy of celebration that prevails. The groom is coming! He is in control! And we need to cling onto this if we are going to keep our faith alive, our lamps lit.

You see, there are many ways of looking at the history of the human race. Shakespeare in the play Macbeth describes life as a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. And no-one is quite sure who it was who described history as just one damned thing after another. And when we consider war it is easy to see human history as just one unending conflict, with the fittest prevailing and surviving. And in a time of pandemic it is easy to see the world as a threatening and inhospitable place. But not for Christians. 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 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 not be pictured as a vale of tears and groaning and pain. We believe that finally, at last, God's creation will not be pictured as a wasteland of pollution and the destruction of eco-systems. We believe that finally, at last, God's creation will be pictured as a wedding party where we feast and dance and the night gives way to dawn. The voices of the bride and groom will not finally be banished but there will be singing. And we need to drink this in. We need regularly to remind ourselves of this. It's what we do in worship. Here in our worship we reframe life, we reimagine it as a wedding in which there is a hiatus, a delay – yes, but we wait in hope. And in that way we are sustained.

So, very briefly, to two other features of this story. And the first is by way of contrast with the parable. The story, surely, ends on rather a downbeat note – the bridesmaids with oil refuse to share with those without. But on our reading of the story this is not how to behave. If oil in the story represents our readiness for the long haul, if it represents our resources for keeping our faith alive, then why on earth can't we share this with others? To change the imagery - if we are managing to keep walking along the narrow path, why should we not reach out to those who are falling by the wayside? Let us have great compassion for those who are struggling with faith, those who are stumbling in the darkness and whose oil has run out. Let's find ways to reach out and to share a little of ours.

One last point. If we are to interpret this story in terms of us as Christians keeping our lamps lit and sustaining our faith, there is one flaw. You see, in the narrative, while the bridesmaids wait, the groom is completely absent. He's not there – until he arrives. But for us it's different. Yes, we await Christ's arrival in his Kingdom, and a new heavens and a new earth, and the reign of peace. And when we look at our world today and commemorate the fallen we realise that that day is still a long way off. But as we wait Christ is not completely absent. Faith holds on to the assurance that even in the darkness, even in the silence, he is with us. And we meet him in the ways our lives are blessed and upheld; and we meet him in our gathering for worship; and we meet him in one another

– in reaching out to friend, enemy and stranger. And we meet him in our struggles for peace and reconciliation and justice.

So we wait – for God, for Jesus. And on this Remembrance Sunday we wait for his kingdom of peace. At times it is dark, and we struggle to keep the light of faith alive. But human history is finally revealed to us in the image of a wedding, and as we await the groom he is yet present. So we pray that, together, and in mutual support, our faith might be sustained. Amen.

O gracious, peace-making God, as we today remember the fallen, those who have died in conflicts, 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 conflicts too numerous to mention, Religious conflicts, political conflicts, civil wars - 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 be endowed discipline and discernment, courage and compassion.

We pray today for the United States of America in the aftermath of the election, praying for a peaceful and orderly transition to a new administration, for a healing of the divisions that have opened up in recent times, and for a recovery of trust and commitment to the common good.

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.