

Matthew 25.1-13



“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. “At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ “Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’ “‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’ “But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

“Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’ “But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’ “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

When I was teaching, I remember a poster in the staffroom: In it a somewhat nerdy-looking boy is trying to enter the National School for the Gifted and Talented. He’s carrying a book under one arm and leaning with his other arm, with all his weight, against the door, straining, trying to push open the door. On the door there is a sign in great big letters that explains his problem. It reads, “PULL.”

I can’t help but feel, that’s us. We’re not too good at reading the signs. We anticipate what is going to happen based on what we’ve read or seen on the news, whether we agree with it or not, and are surprised by the reality of the result. How many times have you heard friends or even yourself say, “That’s not what I expected.”

Today’s Gospel passage is a well-known parable about the end times and it anticipates the return of Jesus with all its talk of preparedness or lack of it. The sort of language in today’s Gospel was never meant to foster speculation about when Jesus would return but Matthew is grappling here with the tradition of an imminent Second Coming. It is a warning not to attempt to read “the signs” because they mislead us. Every generation has done that to no avail but will we learn?

It was certainly the case that the people of Jesus’ time had an expectation of his quick return but the key warning, of course, lies in the last verse of today’s passage, *“Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”* As this expectation of an imminent return began to wane, the Gospel writers developed instead a growing sense that discipleship would be played out over the long course of history and, of course, that includes us today and we need to continue in our discipleship: to walk the Christian walk and talk the Christian talk and not to seek to second-guess signs of the end times. The warning, *“Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”* is as much for us today as it was for Matthew’s audience.

In the Gospels the Spirit will guide the church during the time of Jesus’ absence but it is Jesus remembered and Jesus present by his Spirit, rather than Jesus expected, which began shape their communities as it should ours today.

What does it all mean for us today? How can we apply this passage? Can it speak to comfortable people like us today?

That assumes, of course, that we are still able to be totally comfortable when we look at the daily news – if we can get beyond our current governmental melt-down; ISIS and the ongoing fighting in Syria; another nasty little war in The Yemen; the festering ceasefire in Ukraine; Boko Haram in Nigeria; our continuing fear of home-grown terrorism and the rise in the West of Islamophobia not to mention thousands of refugees drowning in the Mediterranean and the ongoing refugee crisis; President Trump's game of who'll blink first with North Korea? And of course Covid 19. Could events such as these be signs of the end times?

Every generation has had these thoughts: "Are we in the end times now?" people have wondered down the years as they confronted what they saw as the signs of their age. They were wrong.

We look back to such times this weekend in our acts of remembrance.

The services and ceremonies of this weekend have had to make drastic changes to what would normally happen and at the last-minute face even more restrictions as the second Lockdown is place.

Despite this all over the country young and old gathered to remember and reflect; each allowing some aspect of the reality of war to touch their soul. Some who gather will bring new or not so new memories of active service. Some will carry in their heart the memory of an especially loved one who made the ultimate sacrifice. Many will be stretching their imaginations to try to grasp what those people must be feeling. All will be praying that as time rolls forwards, human beings will find ways of resolving their differences which do not involve warfare.

I have no personal experience of armed conflict, but both my grandfathers were in World War 1. Both survived the war although one returned having been exposed to gas which led to an early death before I was born. My father was an engineer and spent WW2 making tools and parts for various war machines and his nights on top of mills watching for German bombers and fires.

My Father in law was in the expeditionary force at the start of WW2 and was evacuated from Dunkirk by a Scarborough fishing boat. As a Royal Engineer he came to Arbury hall to regroup, before returning to action in East Anglia filling in holes in runways after German bombers had attacked so that the fighters planes could land during the Battle of Britain. From there to North Africa then Italy and finally Germany. Finally returning home to Yorkshire after the war ended.

One of my grandsons is now in the Army Medical Corps and training as a medic and will be attached to a regiment like the Paras in a paramedic support role.

When Jesus said to the disciples, *When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.* (Luke 21:9) I doubt my great-grandfathers had those words ringing in their ears, but the men of their generation who served in the trenches, and the men a generation later who liberated the concentration camps or witnessed the aftermath of the nuclear attack on Japan must have wondered, however fleetingly, whether they had witnessed the worst of humanity and what that meant for the future of our civilization, or even whether their experiences were part of the end of civilization in a world that has such capacity for destruction.

Many came and still come to occasions like Armistice ceremonies out of a strong sense of duty, out of a sense of solidarity because they had been part of an elite group of servicemen and that linked them for all time to those others who had served in whatever capacity.

In more normal times, the Service of Remembrance from the Royal Albert Hall embodies in the deeply symbolic rain of poppy petals at the close of the service which gives a sense of awe and of desolation which most of us couldn't always fully understand or explain and which the passing of the years has never diminished, somehow as one untouched by conflict, entering into this powerful sense of communal loss. Personally it's that sense that's still evoked by the poppy and I think back to the hundreds of thousands who travelled from all over the country and further afield a year or so back to stand for a moment in silence at the Tower of London and to look at the cascade of poppies that had been set there as a reminder of the enormity of the sacrifice of those who fought and died.

I look forward to a time when we can once more have such public demonstrations of our commitment to Remember lest we forget.

But words are difficult to find to explain emotions like remembrance, so silence is the true language of remembrance: a silence that is calm and mutual; a silence that is the recognition that what matters is so much more than we can ever say, so much so that it seems most appropriate to honour that fact through reflection and remembering.

Maybe as you get to this point in the reflection you might like to just take a break, and spend 2 minutes silently reflecting on those who have been there for us in the past. Those who have made it possible for us to be free - despite the restraints imposed on us in the current war against the Covid virus

A Silence is kept

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, We will remember them

And we must remember, too, those who survived but whose lives have been shaped by their experiences: the wounded in body, mind or spirit. So we also remember today those who live with post-traumatic stress disorders which can be triggered by things that for the rest of us are simply a normal part of daily life.

Let us in this current Covid war remember all who serve whether in the NHS or as delivery drivers, carers or shop worker, teachers or neighbours the list goes on. They are our support and we must remember them and those of them who have paid a high price for doing so.

It is our duty today to ensure that those who, in the cause of peace, have given, and continue to give of their life, their health, their youth, are honoured and remembered. But in our remembering we must also vow to give of ourselves for the good of humanity, especially for the generations yet to come who will themselves one day stand in silent remembrance and live in hope for the future rather than in fear that the world is ending.

Our role is to continue to walk the walk and talk the talk of the Christian life through the good times and the dreadful times: to live out the Gospel in word and deed; to be, in the words of last week's Gospel, the Peacemakers*, who Jesus said were blessed and to pay no heed to what others see as the signs of the end times, remembering Jesus' words in Matthew, "*keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour*".

Keep safe and keep in touch with each other

Peter

With many thanks to the inspiring word of the Rev. Harry Lewyar

*Matthew 5:9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.