

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost - 8am only
Year A - 8/11/2020

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25
Psalm 78:1-7
1 Thessalonians 4:9-18
Matthew 25:1-13

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

I am constantly amazed when, as happens quite frequently, I hear the following sort of report on the evening news. “Police and SES personnel are searching rugged bushland this evening for a couple who are lost, after not returning from a planned bushwalk this afternoon. The couple, who are not experienced walkers, and who are wearing only light clothing, have little water, and their relatives are very concerned for their safety.”

Now, tell me, what is wrong with this story? Let’s list them - inexperienced walkers, in rugged bushland; wearing only light clothing; inadequate supplies. Here is a classic example of *not being prepared*; not thinking through a situation and being aware of the possible outcomes and consequences. Surely, in today’s age of high tech equipment and seemingly endless array of gadgets and gizmos available in outdoor shops, nobody should be unprepared.

Of course, as we hear in today’s Gospel, the phenomenon of being unprepared is not a new one! Those ten bridesmaids, five of them wise, but five of them foolish serve to remind us that the state of preparedness is essential for us, as Christians, as we seek to live in the world.

This is one of the three final parables in Matthew’s Gospel which our lectionary sets down for us to receive prior to the season of Advent. Advent is, of course, an intentional season in the Church’s year in which we are to wait and to prepare for the coming birth of Christ. Yet, in a sense, we are always waiting; always preparing. Or, at least, we should be...

In the early Church, the followers lived with a purpose, and a hope in their hearts that they were going to see the risen Christ again. They believed that, as Christ had promised, he would return in all his glory, and they literally expected it to happen, each and every day.

And so, when the signs and omens seemed to suggest to them, often taking scriptural quotations into account, that this coming was imminent, and then it didn't happen, they became discouraged; they became disillusioned; and eventually, many of them gave up on the idea.

Today, I think, we are almost the opposite; many Christians don't even consider the possibility that Jesus may return again. It seems, to many, to be a lost cause - there is some sense that we are living our life here on earth, and that when we die we may (or may not) go to that place we speak of as heaven, but there is no notion that Christ will come; creating a new Kingdom here on earth; bringing in God's reign on earth.

And yet we proclaim it every week: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, *Christ will come again!*" Does the way that we live out our Christian life reflect that proclamation?

So what is this morning's parable trying to say? Put simply, it is a warning; a salutary reminder to the disciples who were listening, but also to all followers of Jesus, that they must live their lives in a state of readiness; readiness for Christ's return to earth. To do so means that their lives must be in accordance with his teachings, and be lives which honour God.

And so, parabolically, the wise and foolish bridesmaids of which Jesus is speaking in the parable are *all* of us Christians, and the bridegroom arriving for the wedding banquet may be considered as Jesus, or as the kingdom of heaven.

The overall thrust of the message, then, is an exhortation to watchfulness, to preparedness. This means living in such a consistently moral and obedient way that we would be ready to give an account to God of how we have lived, when he, as the bridegroom arrives at an unexpected time.

Moreover, we are to be devoted to our tasks, so that distractions, ill health, and fatigue do not get in the way of our waiting. We are to be as concerned with the work of the kingdom as a bridesmaid waiting the arrival of a bridegroom.

The Thessalonians, it seems, have become tired and distracted. As we heard in the second lesson, they were also waiting, but the long delay in Jesus' coming was wearing on their nerves. They had begun considering what the delay meant, since they were already experiencing deaths in their congregation while everybody expectantly looked to the sky for Jesus' return.

Paul reassured them that the word of the Lord accomplishes its own purposes in its own time. Their deliberations would not affect God's timetable.

Is that how it is for us, sometimes? Do we put timetables on God's Word, on God's actions. "Lord, please heal me"... RIGHT NOW! "Your Kingdom come"... but it had better be pretty soon, because I don't know how much more of this I can take! You and I know the sort of thinking we are guilty of. And we do it all the time - ascribing human attributes to God instead of accepting that we do not know God's will; God's ways; God's timetable.

I was reflecting on this during the week as I prepared the order of service for the 9.30 service today, where we will baptize one person and confirm another two. And as part of the Baptismal liturgy everybody there will say these words: "we therefore receive and welcome you as a member with us of the body of Christ, as a child of the one heavenly Father, and as an inheritor of the Kingdom of God." As an inheritor of the Kingdom of God... Is this what we believe?

That we are all inheritors of God's Kingdom? Yes, as Christians, this is our promise; this is our strength. This is the reward for the wise bridesmaid; this is the promise that was given in the person of Jesus Christ; in the human face of God.

My prayer for you today is that you would know that promise; that you would see the face of Christ in those around you; in those who minister to you, and in those to whom you minister. And, I pray, that you will be strengthened by God; that you would have your lamps constantly replenished with oil, and that you would wait, expectantly, for the coming of God's Kingdom, as Jesus taught us.

Amen