

05 Third Sunday before Advent

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 4.13-18; Matthew 25. 1-13

Paying attention

Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Matthew 25:13

These weeks before Advent have a very pre-Advent feel. The familiar themes are starting to emerge. It's almost as though we're waiting to wait, preparing to prepare, expecting to be expectant – teetering on the edge of the edge of the coming of the Kingdom.

And not surprisingly so, because we are very much aware of being surrounded by a cloud of witnesses in these days, as each week sees a parade of saints to be commemorated for their extraordinary commitment to the unveiling of that Kingdom – always at some personal cost. We are being pointed to God – and to the price of living according to God's values and demands.

Today we are plunged into the story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, their lamps and their oil. It was traditional in Jesus' time and place that the bridegroom fetched his bride from her parents' house and took her to his own. So presumably the bridesmaids in the story were waiting up with the bride as she waited for the groom to arrive. And he was late. So they waited with her in her waiting, as their lamps burned against the darkness of the night.

I wonder what they talked about, before they became drowsy and slept. Did they share their own hopes of marriage and family – or their hopes of avoiding all that and living differently from their friend? Did they reassure her that they would still be there for her in her new life? Did they promise to visit her and keep her company as she found her feet in the unfamiliarity of another family? Before they fell asleep, did they tell her how much they loved her?

This story is set very firmly in a series of stories about the coming of the end – which is in fact a beginning. Jesus speaks of a time when nations will wage war against one another, people will betray those whom they love, the sun will be darkened, the stars will fall from heaven, one person will be taken and another left, false Messiahs will arise, and the Son of Man will come. The world can feel that way sometimes – as, at the moment, can the Church. Is Jesus talking about now, or another time yet to come? Or both?

Into this vision come these stories of people who were not ready, and the consequences of their un-readiness. The slave in charge of the household who is found eating and drinking with the servants is cut into pieces and put with the hypocrites. The man who buried his one talent is thrown into outer darkness. Those who failed to visit the stranger in prison and to clothe the naked are sent to eternal punishment. And the door of the wedding feast is cruelly shut against the bridesmaids whose negligence has allowed their lamps to go out.

What we take all of this to mean in terms of the consequences of how we live – how we bear responsibility, use our gifts and time, respond to the needs of those around us, ensure that we properly resource ourselves - what we take it to mean if we are found wanting in these things, will depend on our understanding of the nature of God. If we believe that it is in God's nature

ultimately to exclude people from the divine love and presence, then the meaning is simple and clear. Make the wrong decisions now and fail to repent before our time runs out and the condemnation is final. If we have difficulty reconciling this picture with our understanding of God's love as unreservedly gracious and eternally inclusive, we will hear differently.

In which case what will we hear? No matter how strong our conviction that all creation is held in God's love and God's mercy, the tone of the stories is deeply challenging. The language is spare: *Those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us'. But he replied, 'Truly I tell you, I do not know you'. Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.*

The strength of the imagery and starkness of the ending leave us in no doubt that even if we can, should and do believe that Christ's love embraces us all, in the meantime our lives are not to be trifled with. Much as the front cover of our Newsletter reminds us today, it matters what we pay attention to. And it matters how prepared we are in our day to day living – even in the little things – because that in turn has an impact on what we can attend to, and the quality of our attention. Our neglect has as much impact as our care, and that can be hard on those around us. We know this to be true.

I still wonder what those bridesmaids talked about as they waited. And whether the unprepared bridesmaids – who hadn't stopped to think to bring their oil flasks – were as inattentive to the conversation around them as they were to their practical preparations. Whether they were as unaware of the hopes and fears, the longings and insecurities, the intimacies and nuances of the human interactions they were privileged to, as they were of the need to bring extra oil.

There's a Kathy Galloway poem which I've failed to lay my hands on this morning but which begins something like: 'People tell me terrible things over coffee'. It's about how the really important encounters in our lives sometimes occur in the seemingly most ordinary of moments and activities and places. And how unprepared we often are.

There's something in today's Gospel story and those that surround it which points to the fundamental importance of learning to recognise the moment when it comes. The moment when the challenge of God's kingdom breaks into our everyday existence in the form of a question such as: what are you doing with your time and why?; are you really listening to that person and hearing what they're saying?; what sort of attention are you paying to what sort of things?; are you even trying to glimpse God in those momentary flashes of glory which we are sometimes given in the colours of our so-called ordinary day?

This resonates for us not only as individuals, but as a church community which is part of a wider Anglican Communion which is wrestling with itself, observed by a wondering world as it does so. As a community, our questions might be: where are we putting our energy?; who are we listening to and what are we hearing?; what is the quality of our attention to those with whom we are in sympathy and those with whom we disagree?; are we arrested by the flashes of God's glory in our midst? What are we unveiling of God's kingdom?

Paul writes to the Christians at Thessalonica: *For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.*

Glimpses of the life of glory are on offer, here and now. As are glimpses of chaos and human damaging. Both are given to us through others in conversation - or in our observation of their lives; through our lives in community; or our perceptions of what is going on in the wider church or world. But are we paying attention? Do we desire those glimpses? Are we ready for them? Do we want to know what they mean? Are we willing to live by what they might reveal?