

6th November 2016

Reverend Roger Walker
Matthew 25:1-13

We have started counting down to Advent, the season when we think about the coming of Jesus. That's what Advent means but it is not his coming as a baby that we celebrate on Christmas Day - rather, Advent focuses on Jesus' coming again to judge the living and the dead. The parable which we heard today about the ten virgins - bridesmaids in their own terminology, waiting for the bridegroom to come - is following up on the prophecy of Jesus, recorded in the Chapter before our Reading. This was about the signs that will precede Jesus' second coming and his two warnings. First 'no-one knows the day or the hour of the second coming: not even the angels, nor the Son, but only the Father'. This warning was saying 'don't look at the prophecies and say this has happened and that has happened, so the second coming must be next'.

We cannot calculate this and we see an illustration of it at the end of the Book of Daniel, which, although it is set in the seventh century BC, is actually the last book of the Old Testament to be written. To encourage the Jews under the persecution of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 170 BC. Daniel ends with this prophecy of the coming of the Messiah – “from the time that the daily sacrifice is abolished – in 168 BC, when the Temple is desecrated by Antiochus – there will be 1290 days”. So another verse is added: “Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of 1335 days” And when nothing happened then, another verse “As for you, go your way until the end”.

If it does nothing else this shows us the futility of trying to predict God's timing, although even now the occasional Evangelist - usually American - sets a date for the second coming, only to be proved wrong! That's Jesus' first warning - with a little digression - no-one knows the time when he will come again except the Father. The second one is 'keep watch because you don't know on which day your Lord will come' and that is reinforced by a parable of a servant who is not dutiful in looking after his master's affairs while he is away. The master comes back unexpectedly and the servant suffers an unpleasant fate.

Next comes the parable in our Reading, reinforcing the warnings. We have five wise virgins who take spare oil with them to keep their lamps alight while they wait - and five foolish ones who blithely assume that everything will be all right and that someone else will bail out their fecklessness. Nobody does so, and while these five are trying to sort out their foolishness the bridegroom comes. The doors are shut and they are left outside with the uncompromising dismissal 'I tell you the truth, I do not know you'. And the warning is repeated 'keep watch because you do not know the day or the hour'. This parable would have resonated with the early Christians who believed that it would not be long before Jesus returned in glory.

We can see this reflected in many of St Paul's Epistles and expressed in his words to the Thessalonians, which we heard today. Nearly 2000 years have passed since Jesus ascended into heaven – we believe that he will come again but it is not something that fills our thoughts. We don't expect it to happen in our lifetime, so how do we deal with teaching like that in our parable of the ten virgins with its implications of a swift return and its warnings to keep watch?

We need to remind ourselves that we do not seek to live a Christian life because of fear of Jesus coming again and catching us out in sin but because we love him for what he has done for us – and that it is for this reason that we want to please him. We also believe in forgiveness of sins – because of Jesus' death on the Cross for us and this enables us to be much more positive in making amends for our failures, knowing that we have God's forgiveness and then leaving them behind rather than having them hanging over us in a cloud of guilt and self- recrimination.

So we might ask – “Why did Jesus tell the parable of the wise and foolish virgins?”. He told it because he was real about the human condition. He knew that there were those who would accept him and live according to his teaching, but he also knew that there would reject him and his

teaching and whose destiny would be eternal separation from God. The door shut and the cry "I do not know you" – he did not want to give the impression that everyone – believers and non-believers, obedient and disobedient, would all be the same at the last. There will be a final judgment and there will be, to quote another of his parables, sheep and goats. The parable of the wine and foolish virgins, as well as being a reminder of his coming again is also a call to perseverance in Christian faith and life, where wisdom and sound judgment should be as much an aspect of our lives as belief in Christ and a loving care for others. Both of these should be overflowing, like the extra jars of oil: not the bare minimum we think we can get away with. We need to examine our lives in the light of this parable and make sure that we are walking with the wise virgins, not the foolish ones.

AMEN

Rev. Roger Walker
6.11.16