

Matthew 25:1-13 (NRSV)

1 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.’ 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9 But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’ 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. 11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ 12 But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’ 13 Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Stay alert

Today’s Remembrance Sunday gospel, Matthew 25:1-13, is a parable of Jesus urging hearers to keep awake, or to use current government terminology, to ‘stay alert’ and ‘save lives’.

An older generation and many of our contemporaries in the world today have shown their watchfulness by standing guard in the armed forces at home or overseas. Some have also served in myriad ways outside the military in defence of human life and freedom. Our remembrance today is for all those who have served in the cause of freedom, justice and peace. As we do year on year, we make our own commitment to the cause of humanity and peace, motivated by the love of God who calls the peacemakers blessed.

On Remembrance Sunday we acknowledge the many traumatic effects of war that shapes and mis-shapes lives in many ways: the mental and physical scars, the enduring effects of bereavement, the spiritual consequences of war, the fixing of attitudes and the experiences that are hard to forgive.

I often think of my grandfather, my uncle (his son), and other close relatives who enlisted and crossed the channel in time of war without knowing whether they would return. Thankfully they did. For them, service of that kind was what their day and circumstances demanded. It was their way of staying alert. They did so not as a superhuman sacrifice, but as a duty they were called upon to fulfil.

Recently I found a memoir my Grandmother wrote for her children, in which she refers to ‘Father’, meaning the father of her five children. This is what she said:

‘When the first World War came, to my distress Father enlisted. Some of his training was on the East Coast, men billeted in small houses, and unusual conditions. When possible I joined him. Local residents were kind, inviting me to meals and for baths. Later Father went to France as a signaller and served in lice-infected dug-outs where he contracted myalgia... I shall never forget the day of his departure to France. I felt like a block of ice; his return was wonderful.’

I knew him only as a picture on the wall, for he died a few years after the Great War, but it occurred to me recently that he was probably billeted somewhere near here, and most likely embarked from Folkestone. I think of that as I look across to France.

Each family has their own story of the impact of two world wars and of subsequent conflicts. The stories are personal, affecting us in different ways, and the consequences of war carry on to later generations, and from later conflicts.

On a visit to SW London recently to review church related community work there, I was given a walking tour of the neighbourhood near Denmark Hill. Traditional Victorian terraces were punctuated every two or three houses by modern construction built over Second World War bomb sites. I thought of the families on the home front whose lives were destroyed or turned upside down when these properties were destroyed often with people inside. For them, staying alert had meant listening for the siren and diving into shelters in hope of escape from death or injury. Those were strange and difficult times, just as we face our own strange times today, in a different fight that is also costing many lives.

Turning to the gospel, we find in the parable a world that seems quite strange – a world upside down. Who expects a wedding to be held at night? Wouldn't we hope that a bridegroom would turn up on time, for if anyone is late it is usually the bride! Excluding some of the bridesmaids from the party because they lack a torch also seems weird. But times change, and who thought a few months ago that weddings and church services would be stopped for weeks on end by government order? The gospel message is that it matters to 'stay alert' looking not for an enemy but for God's appearing.

My father once came home from a meeting at a church where he was an Elder. They had been discussing a new and more efficient boiler system that was being installed. But they were left with some storage tanks full of oil left over from the old system. Father made a suggestion to the Elders: "What we need to do is to sell it to some foolish virgins". Whether they found any, I never heard!

The wise and foolish young women were waiting not for a good deal on oil, but for the delayed bridegroom to arrive. The bridegroom is the saviour figure who in Christian preaching is Jesus Christ. His first arrival was long anticipated and his latter return is also long awaited. He represents our hope of salvation in every way.

I think of my grandma who felt like a block of ice when my grandfather went to the trenches, and whose return was wonderful to her. Christ's return is even more anticipated and glorious, representing light and hope not just for one family, but for the world. The parable urges us to stay alert, keeping hope alive, lighting the way.

Let me conclude with words from Bill, a World War II veteran, who shared his hopes on Remembrance Day while at a memorial. He has wisdom on what it means to stay alert to the dangers of war.

So here we stand again. A year has passed.
Once more our sorrow turns to millions killed.

What have we learned?
What do you say to us, dear soldier
from your eternal silence?

Do you implore us to improve our killing efficiency,
to make bigger and better bombs,
condemning millions more to your sad fate?

Do you cheer us on in our blindness?
How many thousands have we added to your number, this past year?
No – I hear you plead now. I hear you cry to us across the
years:

‘Weep not for me but for those yet unborn.
Go! – save your own children from my fate
Go! – thank me, by walking away today
to reject the futility, the waste, and the lie
that you have repeated over and over
even as you stand
for where do your billions go,
if not to ensure far more will know the hell I knew?
It is too late for me.
I have no voice but yours,
please – speak for me.
So, when you stand here again,
when this next year has passed,
come here in certainty
that you have taken some small step
along a different road...’

Now let us pray in words written for the Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) in 2014:
God of all humanity
Help us to be a people who embrace truth
And challenge those narratives that distort reality
And serve the interests of those who promote them.
Grant us the courage to challenge injustice,
The resolve to work for a fairer world
And the wisdom to recognise where our actions and inactivity
Add to the struggles of others.
As we pray for all people caught up in conflict
We ask that those who wield power and influence on our world
Might find the resolve
To truly commit themselves to bring peace and healing to all nations.
Through Christ our Lord and King
AMEN