

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> November 2020**  
**Third Sunday before Advent**

**Collect**

God, our refuge and strength,  
bring near the day when wars shall cease  
and poverty and pain shall end,  
that earth may know the peace of heaven  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**1 Thessalonians 4:13-end**

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 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 for ever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

**Matthew 25:1-13**

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." 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." 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. 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.

## Sermon

It was Remembrance Sunday some years ago, when I was preparing to go to theological college. I was quite heavily involved in my local church, which is the Civic Church in Guildford, so holds the Civic Service of Remembrance with all the local dignitaries. It was as I was walking to the 8 o'clock service that I received a text message from the Rector, explaining that he was very unwell, and could a group of us meet at 9 am to discuss what to do about the Civic Service.

Suffice it to say that it was a pretty frantic morning. One of the local ministers at the church had taken a service of remembrance the previous day at a local care home, so had a homily that he could use for the Civic Service. He was also able to lead the service. The Orders of Service had already been prepared, and readers and musicians were ready. I had attended the service the previous year, so walked through what happened at the War Memorial with the minister. And so what felt like it could be a disaster when we received the original text message ended up being a well choreographed act of remembrance. Even when the trumpeter fainted, the Director of Music took up his baton and the service continued.

It is an experience that made me think a lot about the parable of the ten bridesmaids. The call to keep awake, to be prepared had a particular significance when Jesus was speaking, but it remains relevant in every context. And being prepared is somewhat like the way we all worked together on that Remembrance Sunday morning. We could not have anticipated that the Rector would be unable to lead the service that morning. But when it happened, we worked together, making use of both our knowledge, experience and skills to ensure that the service took place.

In 2002, the tragic murder of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in Soham hit the headlines. Not long afterwards, a teenage boy, Adam Morrell, was murdered in Loughborough. In both cases the clergy of the local areas were heavily involved. Such tragedy inevitably brings a desperate need for a spiritual response and the church became an important haven where people could bring their disbelief, shock, anger, desperation, hurt and pain. The Vicars found themselves called upon for everything from media interviews to pastoral conversations.

What strikes me when those clergy speak about their experiences, is their recognition that they can only minister in those extreme circumstances because of the foundation they have built in more normal times. Personally, that may look like self-care, which includes taking days off, retreats and holidays, maintaining a healthy spiritual and prayer life, all of which provides strength in the face of the horrific and unexpected. In interviews, Tim Alban Jones has spoken of the network of support in Soham, no doubt nurtured by building relationships before the events of 2002.

We are probably still trying to make sense of what this particular parable may be saying to us in this particular year. While there are those who would tell us that a global pandemic was to some extent predictable, I think it is fair to say that we have all been caught to some extent unawares. And it is also fair to say that those who have suffered most have not done so because they have been reckless and unprepared, but rather because the circumstances have been quite unprecedented.

As time passes, many people are using the analogy of a marathon rather than a sprint, and that feels right. In our response to the initial period of lockdown we probably thought, or at any rate hoped, that restrictions would be relatively short-lived. That a return to normality would be possible within

a few months. Now it seems clearer that what we used to think of as normality is a very long way off indeed.

So I wonder how the parable of the ten bridesmaids might speak to us today. What it might mean to be awake when faced with our current situation.

It strikes me that the analogy of a marathon might be quite helpful. Anyone who runs a marathon trains for a long time – months, rather than weeks. Even those who run regularly are not able to enter a marathon without additional training. Running magazines contain helpful training suggestions. If you want to run a marathon successfully, it is necessary not only to run regularly, but to increase the distance, as well as improving both strength and stamina. Diet is an important part of fitness, as is hydration. And preparations work towards the day of the marathon.

The marathon we are involved in is over a far longer period than a 26 mile race. Yet, as we consider this parable, we may find ourselves able to recognise how our preparation over previous years has made us at least somewhat able to cope. Training for us is really about our sustained prayer and worship over time. It is about the ways we have reflected on what is most important in life. The ways we have not been too conformed to the ways of the world, but rather have kept God at the centre of our lives.

We probably haven't always done these things perfectly, and for many of us lockdown and its aftermath will still have come as a shock and challenge. Yet we do have something to fall back on. And of course we also have fellow travellers on our journey. Others who will share their oil with us because we share ours with them.

On Remembrance Sunday I think there is perhaps an additional element to our preparedness. Over the centuries, the church has been a place where we have marked national and international events. Remembrance Sunday reminds us that we are not the only generation to know hardship, death and tragedy. We are able to place our own circumstances into some kind of perspective by connecting with those who have made sacrifices in the past – and who continue to do so in significant ways today.

Perhaps this year we have been forced to consider what it means to be prepared in somewhat different ways. We have realised that there are some consequences and circumstances that we really can't predict. We have had to recognise that we really aren't in control.

We are probably in rather good company in that understanding, since I expect it would be understood by those who have lived through times of conflict. And maybe they and us have been helped to recognise that the most important preparation isn't about control, but rather about knowing where to place our trust and holding firm to the hope that is in God.

Amen