

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Remembrance Sunday

Please read through these passages slowly and reflectively before reading my sermon.

Wisdom 6:12-16 1 Thessalonians 4:13-end **Matthew 25:1-13**

In writing and reading, speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

While I was reflecting on how the gospel set for this Sunday spoke into a marking of Remembrance Sunday, two associated ideas came to mind.

The image of the bridesmaid lamps took me first to the gospel song:

This little light o' mine, I'm goin' let it shine

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Evrywhere I go, I'm goin' let it shine (repeat)

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

In my neighbor's home, I'm goin' let it shine (repeat)

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

The song's origins are unclear but it became a popular one of the freedom songs of the 1950s and 60s civil rights movement which kept up courage and connection during a time of participants looking forward to a better future, a lifting of oppression and the coming of a new dawn.

The song champions the small flame each of us can keep alight as we wait and watch for something greater to come. It is self-encouragement to make shining that light our own great work for ourselves and for those around us. There is a clarion call to commitment to keeping the light burning, visible and undiminished whatever may come.

In contrast the second association was specifically and directly connected with memories of the first and second world war. The statement first made by the then foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, purportedly as he watched the lamplighters on the evening of August 3rd 1914 :

“The lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our life time”

It was later echoed in a speech of Churchill in 1938.

Most recently it was this phrase that inspired the national ceremony of turning off the lights between 10-11pm, to mourn the beginning of the First World War, on August 4th 2014.

Five oil lamps that burn strongly to light the arrival of the bridegroom

Five oil lamps that splutter, smoke and delay their bearers return from last replenishing so they miss being present in the place of celebration when it matters.

This little light of mine, I am going to let it shine.....

The lights are going out... we shall not see them lit again.....

And Jesus tells his hearers: keep awake!

Jesus' parable of the bridesmaids and their oil lamps is one of a series that Matthew places towards the end of Jesus' teaching in the gospel, which focus on preparation for Jesus' return, and the judging of all things. In critical scholarship there is a divergence in

interpretation of some of these: some scholars will read these as a literal preparation for Jesus' return, expected imminently in the early church; others emphasise that, whether literal in its expectation or not, it was a style of teaching by Jesus used to generate a serious response to the transformation of life he was offering. These interpreters say that the important reaction to these stories is that we take seriously the command to keep awake: not just for the coming of Christ in judgement on the last day but also as those who welcome his presence in judgement of our daily living, our life in the world as we find it.

As we read the gospel in the context of reflecting on the impact of war in the world of which we are part, the huge cost of war to those who have fought in the cause of good, as well as those who were their opponents, and our own responsibility for whether we further the cause of peace, love and reconciliation in our society or stoke division and discord; it is perhaps timely to recognise Jesus' call to us to "stay awake" as a call for the here and now of our lives, as well as preparing us for its end.

One way of looking at the different attitudes of the two groups of bridesmaids in the parable is to see that the wise bridesmaids had a full reservoir of oil in their lamps, the fuel for a light to last as long as it needed. Even when, in their own frailty they dozed, the lights burned on and were there to light the way into the deeper night

before the coming they awaited: "this little light of mine... I am going to let it shine"

The "foolish bridesmaid" did not have the reservoir of oil to draw on and perhaps their sleep was oblivious to what might be needed next, leaving it to others to take responsibility: so they woke up to discover "the lights are going out".

Shining as a light for peace, for love, for reconciliation in the work, shining as a beacon of the light Jesus brought, brings and is bringing our world can be tiring and costly. Staying awake to notice and try to bring healing to things that seed discord and widen divisions is demanding and takes all kinds of energy. If we are wise, we will anticipate the need to create for ourselves and in the world around us, the reservoirs of lamp oil that we can draw on to stay alight with love and peace, hope and joy for the duration.

The annual focus of this Remembrance Day is about remembering those who have paid the price for the times when that light is allowed to grow dim and war results, and about challenging all that potentially dims the light of peace and equity, solidarity and mutual flourishing today: and so many events all over the world in the last year show us that the call to remain awake and vigilant is not diminished in our own generation.

But, also this year, it seems to me we have a particular calling to create such oil reservoirs for ourselves and our communities so we can continue to shine with love and peace and hope and joy, lighting the challenges of this second “stay at home” period that we find ourselves in now. Our Archbishops’ call for us to make this a month of prayer is one way of filling our own reservoir as we renew our openness to God at work in our own hearts and across our world. They have asked that all people of goodwill pray not only on Thursday at 6pm but on every evening at that time, giving us a specific intention for each day and a focus for each of the coming weeks. They also ask us to consider making a fast on a Thursday – giving up something so that you have a closer awareness of God and clarity of vision. They are encouraging us to rediscover treasured Christian spiritual disciplines as a reminder that we are called to serve our nation not just in our practical action, but also in our own openness to God for others not just our private comfort. These are the acts of wise bridesmaids, fuelling their lights for the duration.

In their open letter the Archbishops ask us to focus on bringing the gifts of CALM, COURAGE and COMPASSION to our communities. These is the qualities of light that they discern as a need in our world. As the church, as members of one body, each of us may have a particular quality that is our gift – and I encourage you to

nurture in yourself calm, or courage, or compassion with real intention to bring that quality into all the contact you have with others – so that together we may be the full reservoirs that fuel the light that is both lasting and wise in these challenging times.

For all those who have lit the way in the past we give thanks,

To be calm, courageous and compassion light bearers in our generation, we ask God's grace, in the name of the bridegroom for whom we wait. Amen