

Sunday November 8<sup>th</sup> 2020: Remembrance Sunday.

3<sup>rd</sup> before Advent. 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday back in Lockdown.

### **Matthew 25: 1-13**

Matthew's gospel story is about the 5 foolish and the 5 wise bridesmaids. At its heart it is a story about choices and their consequences and are challenged to reflect on them and examine how we live our lives.

Jesus warns his listeners "Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the time".

Tucked away, behind the kitchen door of a small country chapel is a plaque, commemorating the life of a young man called William. He was an only child and he died in Italy in 1918 at the age of 21. He had signed up for active service at 17, and never returned home. The plaque is easily missed, and it has never been moved but the Church building was reconfigured with a kitchen built onto the church porch. So, he is there now, forever looking down upon the cups and saucers as they pile up in the kitchen sink. It is only the elderly members of the church who can remember how the building was before they had a kitchen, and there is no one there who remembers William. We are left to just imagine the love and the grief that gathered in his parent's hearts and led them to commission the plaque on the church wall; they wanted him to be remembered.

We must remember, that is what this day is for, and what we will be doing again on Wednesday.

To remember, to bring the past into the present. To try to reimagine the past and to understand it, because if we don't, people who have been too young to see world wars, will have no knowledge of what can happen. They will not understand the consequences on a global scale or understand the value of the life and the freedom that they take for granted today, even under lockdown.

In Northern India, in a place called Kohima, there is an epitaph, carved into a huge granite memorial to the 2<sup>nd</sup> British Division, who died during a conflict there. The words have become so familiar to us and are used as part of our remembrance liturgy every year; "when you go home, tell them of us and say, " for your tomorrows we gave our today"."

The reading of names at the cenotaph, being led in a variety of ways today is an important way for us to remember, and each name represents a family, and a story.

Matthew's gospel story for today is about being ready. The story tells of 10 bridesmaids, young women who have dreamed of this day all their lives, being bridesmaid for their best friend and then hopefully soon being a bride themselves. They have the whole of their lives mapped out before them.

Each girl has an oil lamp, their task is a simple one...to keep their lamp alight, for when the bridegroom and his party arrive. The story begins well with all 10 girls ready, prepared, waiting excitedly for the groom to ride into town and claim his bride. But as time goes on, we discover that some of the girls are ill equipped for even this simple task, and they run out of oil. Now when their big moment comes and they stand up to greet the groom, their lamps have gone out. They do the obvious thing and ask the other girls to help them out, share their oil, but their requests are refused. The 5 bridesmaids have no other option, but to dash off to the shops to buy some more oil only to discover that when they return, they have missed him...they were too late!

When the bridegroom arrived, they are nowhere to be seen; because they had to go and get what they believed they needed. But that made me wonder...did they really need the oil? What was it that they really needed? Maybe it wasn't oil? Maybe what they really *needed*, was to see the bridegroom himself? Maybe if they had stayed and explained to him what had happened maybe, just maybe, he might have led them through the darkness, towards his light. But they missed him.

This story made me think that perhaps what its about is that even when we don't feel ready to respond to God, even when we don't believe that we are equipped to do what he asks us, rather than running off in a panic, perhaps we should stay and sit it out, swallow our pride and just meet Jesus. We are told that he has all we need. He took all our unworthiness, all our unpreparedness to the cross and made it possible for us to enter into a new way of living with Him.

Keep awake says Jesus, for you know not the day or the time – it is as true for now as it was for those 10 bridesmaids, as it was for William in 1918.

The irony to this story of course is that we will never have enough oil, we cannot do all this wating, this readiness, this surviving all on our own resources, even those 5 other bridesmaids, called the wise ones but I've always thought of them as the "mean girls", would have run out of oil in the end. We cannot do any of this in our strength, id this story says anything to us right now, surely t is about how we live, what we do, who we live with and what we are looking for?

With this new pandemic lockdown I think it is important for us, however sad we may feel about not being together, however disappointed we feel about not seeing friends, we have a hope that far outstretches whatever the government, the virus, or anything else do, because ultimately all things do work together for good, and God has not given upon us. Our gospel message is one of Hope in the face of despair.

How do we honour those that we have lost? Those we remembered last week at our All Souls service, and those we remember this week at Armistice: those like William who gave up their lives for others? How do w honour his parents who placed that plaque so that others would not forget, so that we would remember?

Maybe it's done best by how we live our lives? By living well even in lockdown. Loving one another putting others needs first, sharing our lamp oil, and making peace where peace is ours to make. The new government slogan and accompanying advertisement is all about looking after each other, even looking after people that we don't personally know: Hand, Face, Space, focuses on us doing it not just for or loved ones but for everyone , and I'm not sure the PM realises it, but it sounds like the gospel to me!

There is a deeper question too for today. Very soon it will be Advent again, so how do apply all the above and truly get ready to meet our bridegroom – Jesus? Perhaps today calls us to hold out our burnt-out lamps, maybe as symbols of our burnt-out selves, and own up to our lack of oil. Trust ourselves to the God who in his infinite mercy can do far more than we even realise. The God who calls us into his light, always and everywhere, that we might live a life in all its fullness, even in lockdown!

God bless you and keep you safe.

Amen.