

'Watchfulness'

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, All Saint's Belmont, November 8th 2020

Keynote Bible passages: Matthew 25.1 – 13, Joshua 24.1 – 3a, 14 – 25

We humans like to look ahead, of what's coming, and being secure. Thus, having peace of mind. This last week has been anything but, with uncertainty pervading events, a new Cabinet for our government, and the drawn-out results coming in from the election in the United States. Thus, it has been a time of waiting, with anticipation and a measure of impatience.

1) *Context:* The disciples of Jesus similarly when they sensed he would eventually go from them. How would he return again, and what would it be like? Thus, Matthew in his gospel addresses these questions and the resulting uncertainty, and how Jesus responds. Possible events are foreshadowed. Jesus doesn't give a date, saying that is solely in the Father's timing. The church has included this strong motif in the theme of 'Watchfulness' and this is the focus for the sermon. There's also a recent change as the theme usually marked the beginning of Advent, but now occurring a few weeks earlier, even more the need for watchfulness, or a time of preparation. Thus, is included today's gospel of the familiar story of ten girls attending a wedding celebration. Traditionally it is known as the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. If we were to look up Chapters 21 – 25 we would see Matthew has grouped a number of parables, an important way of conveying deeper truths of God's nature. They are introduced as, 'The Kingdom of heaven (or God) will be like this.' Thus, the wedding parable illustrates the theme and the message: 'Keep awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.'. This also links in with the themes of the last few weeks of the kingdom or rule or reign of God as in heaven to be lived on earth.

2) Thus, is portrayed a heavenly dimension' and 'earthed' in the Lord's Prayer: *Your kingdom come on earth as in heaven.*'. Scripture provides a number of examples of what this kingdom will be like, where there's compassion, justice, healing and reconciliation, and the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace. Thus our task while we are 'waiting' is to be about enabling these values or qualities in the world, the nation, the community, and for the church to be a model or active as a 'ginger group' to help it happen ,and where it does happen.

3) There's a third aspect of the *kingdom coming, as it affects our lives.* Thus, as Christians we choose how to live our lives, in the way of Christ. Thus, it is with a sense of readiness, what we have chosen by way of lifestyle, bearing in mind those kingdom qualities. An early biblical example was of Joshua, the Hebrew leader. He set an example for the people of Israel as they moved into the Promised Land. 'Choose then who you will serve, and he owned it himself: 'As for me, and my household, we will serve the Lord.' This is surely our desire for our family, our children and grandchildren. For me this has been to impart Christian values in my children and then for them to choose how they live. Just as my parents did for me.

4) There's a further aspect further illustrating the intent of Jesus to portray the kingdom coming on earth. This is expressed and practised in *care of creation*. It might be summed up in *appreciation*. St Paul especially grasped this truth, in those words, 'whatsoever is beautiful.....think about these things'. Likewise, a number of Psalms, the Hebrew hymnbook describe the beauty of creation. This includes 'looking at' (Psalm 8) and being partners with God in relation to nature and living creatures (Palm 148) St Francis grasped this truth, as in his prayer with 'Brother sun and sister moon,...' We can be aware of this in our environment. Lockdown gave an extensive opportunity – the time and space to appreciate. We noticed the birds came back, including tui, pukeko, and the less common rosellas and spoonbills. Our appreciation extends to other birds in the 'Bird of the Year' competition, including the hoiho, in 2019 and hihi (stitchbird nominated for this year).

A further aspect to which our attention is changing attitudes to aspects of the environment. For example, a few years ago, it was the desire to reclaim 'swamps'. Now we realise these 'wetlands' foster aquatic, insect and plant growth. We might watch out locally for what the prayer book describes as 'the wild places and the bush', being 'hotspots' which perhaps surprisingly support concentrations of different species, 'in our own 'backyard' (as on the hills surrounding Hutt Valley). In an article in New Scientist the writer sums up the situation: 'We have done a reasonable job of protecting majestic landscapes, but the less photogenic pieces of land aren't as well-loved. If we want to stop mass extinction on our planet, we will need to fight it not only on the beaches and on the hills but in the floodplains and the quarries too.'

Furthermore, the importance of God in creation was affirmed by Jesus and the early church. Remember his referring to 'the birds of the air, and the lilies of the field', and nature parable like the sower and the seed. A heartfelt prayer by the disciples began 'Sovereign God, who made the heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them....' (Acts 4). Then Paul's statement of belief of Christ in all creation: 'Christ is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation...in him all things in heaven and earth were created.....' (Colossian 1). And to the people of Athens: 'What therefore you worship as unknown this I proclaim to you, the God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth...' (Acts 17). Thus, our watchfulness can extend to care of the environment, towards the preservation of life on Planet Earth, in its fragile ecological balance.

In summary, if we are learning anything from the present pandemic, things can look stable but the balance can easily be tipped, as also in recognising climate changing, with droughts and intense weather patterns, and the ravages of civil war. So, we need to make our prayer so very real, praying God's kingdom coming on earth. Like the five girls who prepared, we are given the time to promote 'kingdom values. We are to live having chosen whom we serve, and as Pope Francis has referred 'care for Our Common Home'; the preservation of Planet Earth for generations to come.