

## Sermon: Remembrance Sunday, 12<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2023, Liz Gregory-Smith

Gospel: Matt. 25:1-13

The reality of war has been hitting us hard since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. If our senses were already numbed the full horror is being renewed nightly in Israel-Gaza. We see the impact of war in wounded children, orphaned children, desperate hungry parents. We have lost trust in information sources and fear of escalation threatens our sanity. These wars are too close. They are not contained, they disrupt our free society. This is where we are on Remembrance Sunday, 2023.

Whether or not we share in the wreath laying ceremony at the war memorial and join in the words, *'At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember them'*, we surely owe it to the rising generations to know the sacrifice of life that has been made by our own armed forces in both world wars and subsequent operations, many undertaken on behalf of peace. We have to reflect too on the horrendous consequences of initiating or taming ill conceived aggression. Speaking as an octogenarian, born a month before world war was declared in September 1939 I am aware of the unparalleled period of peace our own country has enjoyed since 1945 – 78 years. This has been largely due to the creation of the United Nations to uphold international law.

The gospel for today is a well known story of Jesus about the wise and foolish bridesmaids. How can we use this parable, a story with a message, to guide our thinking and acting today, tomorrow, this week? Can we make helpful connections with something familiar in Palestine 2000 years ago and our present deep concerns? We easily imagine the scene that Jesus may have participated in more than once, the exciting night-time arrival of the bridegroom, and presumably the bride, in procession to the wedding feast. If you've helped in wedding preparations you know 1001 things have to be remembered, dressing the young bridesmaids, each with their own ideas, checking the catering supplies and the guest list, or as in Africa still, for a village wedding everyone must be invited.

On this occasion ten unmarried girls, teenagers for sure, had the privilege of lighting the way for the newly wedded couple. Perhaps you recall an anxious moment in the proceedings, bridegroom pacing the church or venue, trying to smile at the guests. In this story the bridegroom was a long time coming. This would be normal in rural society. The girls all felt drowsy and fell asleep. The midnight cry, 'Here's the bridegroom. Come to meet him!' woke them with a shock. Here was their great moment. They trimmed their oil lamps (maybe oil soaked rags as torches). Five of them had a problem, their lights were going out, and they had not thought to get spare oil. Only the other well prepared five could carry out their privileged responsibility. The feast had started by the time the shoppers had returned from the store. They missed out on the feast.

Like the story of two servants, one responsible and the other irresponsible, that immediately precedes Matthew 24, the message is clear. In both stories an encounter with God's truth came after a delay. Some had given up thinking the encounter would ever happen. Jesus

again and again tried to make his disciples understand that his kingdom would really come, but could only be enjoyed by those who were getting ready for it.

We may reflect that it seems many in Western society have lost the expectation that the bridegroom, Jesus, will return. It's hard to think and pray against the pressure of our secular society that has often forgotten its Christian foundation. Remembrance Day gives an opportunity to give thanks for the great opportunity that peace has given us in health and welfare, in education and exploration and creativity. In the church it is also a time to beware of complacency, a time for repentance for failing to address adequately some of the challenges of new knowledge, e.g. in earth science, technology and psychology. This is not a guilt trip or a blame casting exercise. Rather it is a waking up, as Jesus said, and a turning round.

How do we personally keep ourselves ready? The traditional Christian disciplines are prayer, fasting or self-denial, study of the scriptures, and communal worship of the Eucharist. Together as we give thanks, we proclaim Christ's death and resurrection and receive the gift of his presence. We pray for grace to carry out our everyday responsibilities in a cheerful spirit, seeing other people as his gift to us day by day. That, surely, is getting ready.

We remember, *'O God our help in ages past'* to strengthen us because He is, *'Our hope for years to come'*. We pray, *'Be Thou our guard while troubles last and our eternal home.'* My special prayer today is that the peace my children have enjoyed may extend to the children of the Middle East and wherever precious young lives are threatened by hunger and war. A harder prayer still, *'May those whose lives have ended cruelly know joy beyond our comprehension in the everlasting love of God.'*

Amen