8th November Remembrance Sunday

Reading: Matthew 25: 1-13

Sermon

Today's gospel text tells us in parable form how Jesus wants us to be "prepared,"

Jesus said, "Keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

Recently our politicians have told us to be prepared for war, be prepared for emergency, shortages of food and power. We have to stock up our larders with tinned non perishable food. We need to have wind up radios and a stash of candles because we might have attacks on our energy and food supplies. Cyber attacks are becoming more frequent, fridges overheating in France, power lines going down. The threat of war from places like Russia and Iran and North Korea seem more possible rather then less remote. Then there is predictions of Artificial Intelligence causing the end of civilisation in a decade. Are you prepared?

On one level this parable is about being ready for God. It is always a question before us. Are we ready to meet our maker?

The late Lewis Grizzard, a humorist and author of many columns and books, was by his minister in the hospital. Grizzard was scheduled to have open-heart surgery the next morning. He confessed to his minister that he had not exactly been a paragon of virtue and asked if there were still time to repent. The minister looked at his watch and replied, "Yes, but I'd hurry if I were you."

Even if you have publicly repented, as Russell Brand found out this week, your past deeds still need to be accounted for.

In secular Britain, we don't talk about that kind of thing anymore. But folk have always fought shy of making a step of faith and confronting the ultimate questions of life. They can be prepared for any disaster and have taken out all the necessary insurance policies – but have not seriously considered the one thing that will certainly happen one day – that they will die. Are you prepared?

And Jesus says wouldn't you rather be prepared to go to dinner with a host who might forget to come, than sleep through everything and wake up in the dark, or find yourself hoofing it down to the local garage or supermarket for an oil-flask-refill, trying to hedge your bets, while the host arrived and closed the door without you? Be prepared.

Being prepared is one thing – staying ready and alert and awake is another.

The early reformers of the 16th and 17th century had a great anxiety over what they termed persevering faith. Would someone persevere in their faith unto death so that they died in a state of grace, still in a right relationship with God? If you are serious about following Christ for the rest of your life how do you keep your faith strong? How do we keep our lamps burning? How do we prevent ourselves from burning out?

I am going to use this parable as an allegory to offer some thoughts in answer to those questions.

First of all there were 10 virgins. There were ten. They weren't in it on their own. Waiting is always tedious. It is less tedious when you wait with others. People can cheer you up. Encourage you. Give you moral support. They can also annoy you and irritate you and fall out with you – but I'd still rather wait with others than on my own.

People say to me 'I'm a Christian but I don't need to be part of a church.' What a load of tosh! Unless you meet together with other Christians, it is difficult for your faith to stay alive. If you are having problems in your faith or your personal life, then that is not the time to give up on church. That is more than ever the time you need church.

There is a story about a man whose faith was faltering. He visited a wise old Christian. They sat in front of the coal fire in the sitting room. The old man never spoke, but went to the coal fire and picked out a red hot coal with some tongs and put it on the hearth. He still said nothing. In a few minutes the coal had lost its glow. Then he picked it up and put it back in the fire. After a short time it began to glow again. The old man still said nothing at all but, as he got up to leave, the other man knew exactly why he had lost his fervour – a Christian out of fellowship is like coal out of the fire.

If you extend this illustration - the more on the periphery of the fire you are, the more luke warm you are. The closer to the centre you are - the warmer and more alight you become.

I get great strength and encouragement from being part of a church community and I am deeply grateful for the fellowship I can receive here. It strengthens me in my walk with God.

We are all different. Different people need different ways to belong. But it important to belong – it will keep your flame of faith burning.

Secondly the 10 virgins were split between wise and foolish virgins. Are we sensible or foolish regarding our faith? This parable of Jesus is rooted in the Jewish tradition of contrasting wisdom and folly – being sensible or silly. The writer of Proverbs treats wisdom and folly as two women and describes them calling out to men going by and offering them their respective lifestyles. This story invites us to decide which we'd rather be.

I have sadly known too many people who have started the life of faith but have given up on their faith because they either got embarrassed about it or felt foolish or they just weren't grounded, thought out, thought through.

Faith needs to rest not only on the Bible, the word of God, but also on the work of Jesus and the historical evidence of our faith, and also on reason and experience. If your faith rests only on only one of those then it will be shaky.

You can read anything into the Bible – just ask anyone from the old Dutch Reformed Church who used scripture to justify apartheid. The Bible on its own is not enough to sustain faith. You need to apply your reason. You need to be humble to see how others Christians understand scripture, how the church has understood it through the centuries whilst also being open to the guidance of the holy spirit, the lived real experience of faith today.

Oil is often a symbol in the Bible for anointing and indicating the presence of God's Spirit with a person. Without the Spirit bringing faith, nothing of this makes sense. Being filled with the Spirit, constantly, is a vital aspect of a faith that is aflame.

I try my best to keep these different elements in balance so I hopefully can be a wise follower of Christ. Know the value of them all and the limitations of them all.

Living by faith doesn't mean we take our God given brains out and risk being gullible We are not called to blind faith. We are called to make a step of faith in the light of what we know and what God has shown us. In all things be wise not foolish.

As part of being wise, the parable of the bridesmaids urges watchfulness and self-awareness.

Should this day perhaps be particularly appropriate for contemplating the raw horror of war and the painful dilemmas it poses?

Can a Christian response to all this remain one distinguished by emotion used sparingly, and as carefully in the cause of justice as the wise virgins used their oil?

Can we avoid herd-instinct and, like the wise virgins, remain free agents with our own resources of moral 'oil'?

Can we set aside a previous preference for the incompatible aspirations of either Zionists or Palestinian Arabs in Palestine to do thoughtful justice to what appears to be an existential crisis for both?

What next for Ukraine, and can they depend on their western allies.

After President Trumps' bruising in the mid term elections will he become more reckless and seek vengeance on his enemies with a couldn't care less attitude?

Can we keep on the alert, constantly monitoring our sense of what is proportionate, necessary, and ultimately likely to be effective in bringing peace? God give us wisdom not foolishness.

Thirdly, those who are wise will know their limits. The wise virgins knew they would not have enough oil if they shared with the foolish ones. So they refused their request and told them to go and get their own oil. Know your limits and be realistic about life.

Be realistic about church. We are saints, called by God, loved by God. But we are still on a journey of sanctification – being made perfect. We are not perfect. People will let you down *as much as you let other people down*. Give and take. We all have our limits. Forgive and you will be forgiven.

Know your own limits. I have to keep reminding myself that I am not God, nor the Messiah. It stops me from burning out trying to save the world in my own self righteous way.

Know your limits or else you will burn out.

Fourthly - Be taken up in purposeful service. These girls were doing a lovely thing serving the bride and groom by waiting in this way. It was a responsible job. It cost them. They missed out on some of the fun. But they were part of something bigger that make their lives meaningful. Their light shone for a reason.

I heard about an executive "headhunter" who recruits corporate executives for large firms. This headhunter said that when he interviews an executive, he likes to disarm them. "I offer them a drink," said the headhunter, "take off my coat, undo my tie, throw up my feet and talk about TV, football, family, whatever, until they are all relaxed. Then, when I think I've got them relaxed, I lean over, look them square in the eye and say, 'What's your purpose in life?' It's amazing how top executives fall apart at that question."

Then he told about interviewing one fellow recently. He had him all disarmed, had his feet up on his desk, talking about football. Then the headhunter leaned over and said, "What's your purpose in life, Bob?" And the executive said, without blinking an eye, "To love God, love my neighbour and be with God for ever and take as many people with me as I can."

"For the first time in my career," said the headhunter, "I was speechless." He had encountered someone who was prepared. He was ready. His purpose, "To love God, love my neighbour, and be with God for ever and take as many people with me as I can." You and I might not express it that way, but do you doubt that this is one man who has

extra oil for his lamp?

What keeps me going is having a sense of purpose. Nothing we do for the Lord is in vain. It may cost : but anything worthwhile and precious is costly.

Today we think of the cost many paid through war and yet did so with a sense of purpose. A purpose to defreat evil. A purpose to bring security and peace.

Many of our young people seem purposeless today. What do you want to do with your life? I want to travel...!

Within living memory there may be those who remember how a parent faithfully fought or kept the lamps of love burning at home during WW2 or a subsequent conflict. Having remembered such times, you might like to consider families in Ukraine, or living as evacuees here, who keep the lamps of love burning as they hope and pray for peace, justice and the reuniting of their families.

You may also know partners or spouses, parents or children who keep the lamps of love burning, remaining alert as they act as full-time carers.

Fifthly, these ten girls were virgins! There that has woken you up!

These were the days when you were expected to be a virgin before you got married. Not like today, when sadly you are supposed to be sexually experienced before you enter into a committed relationship. In those days of course, girls would be married from the age of 13. But they would usually be dead by the age of 40. So they got on with it.

Elsewhere in scripture the symbolism of being a virgin is about remaining pure, dedicated, consecrated to your loved one, awaiting the consummation of your passion. The great consummation is a racy phrase that has been used by the church down the ages to talk about the end of time when Christ the bridegroom will come for his bride the church and a new heaven and a new earth will begin, and there will be no more pain or sorrow, sin or death. We await the great consummation. In God's grace we try and keep faithful – but know that there is more to come. It is not down to us to give the final word. It doesn't all depend on us. We have not got there yet. Live with a sense of anticipation and not disappointment. Even with all the knockbacks and hardships know that there is more to come. Anticipate it like a virgin waiting for her wedding night!

Finally - this more to come is a party! It's the devil's trick to make God out to be a miserable pedantic judgemental joyless soul who is out to get us. The God we believe in, the God we see in Jesus, is someone who loves a party. The end of time will be one big party.

Preparing for disaster is something. The traditional Boy Scout motto of “Be prepared” taught generations of kids lots of useful skills. But those “skills” were put into practice by going fishing, rock climbing, toasting marshmallows over a campfire . . fun stuff! They were preparing for good times, not just bad.

As Christians we are called to “be prepared”—-but not just for all those “trials and tribulations” that grab the headlines.

Are you prepared to party?

Are you planning for gloomy-doomy scenarios? Or are you full of great expectations?

Loosen up. Enjoy yourself. What keeps me going is that the God who loves me is a party going God. That sounds fun and gives me licence to have fun now in anticipation of even more fun later.

May God help us to be prepared, to be wise, to keep awake and be ready for the party.