



24th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 12 November 2023

READINGS

Joshua 24:1-3a,14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

“Stay Awake!”

We are three Sundays away from Advent. Arguably the theme often emphasised the most during Advent is waiting: watching and waiting diligently for the coming of Christ. In today’s set of readings, we are presented with a foretaste of such themes, not least through the presentation of the so-called parable of the ten bridesmaids. Now in as much as watchfulness, attentiveness, alertness, and diligence are wonderful values which we should be espousing as Christians, especially as we near Advent, will you really benefit if I tell you, on the basis of our readings, “Stay Awake!”?

I feel like as South Africans we are required to be vigilant about so many things. We have been conditioned to believe that whenever we are out in public we are potentially targets of crime; we avoid talking on our phones in public places, we avoid driving with our windows down. It is probably safe to say that this heightened vigilance probably fosters varying levels of anxiety as well.

Following from this, one might argue that the COVID pandemic ingrained a culture of hyper vigilance and attentiveness which we carry still today. At the height of the pandemic just setting foot outside was a health risk. Entering into crowded spaces likewise, and a cough or a sneeze in a queue set us on edge. In addition to all these things which colour our local context, our media in general, and especially of late, have been saturated with causes for alarm. The conflict in Ukraine which is now almost two years old, and Israel’s retaliation against Hamas, gives one the impression that militarily things are reaching a head. There are also the very many natural disasters supposedly brought about by climate change which has given many a prevailing sense of foreboding.

Advent, as already mentioned, is largely about waiting and watching for the coming of Christ. It is in fact about both advents of Christ’s arrival, his first as a baby 2000 thousand years ago, and what we believe as Christians will be his second and final one at the close of history. As I’m sure you’re aware, there has been much conjecture and speculation around Christ’s second coming as this is traditionally held to coincide with various other catastrophic events. The prophet Joel and the book of Revelation talk about the Sun being darkened, the moon turning to blood, and stars falling from the sky, all events which conceivably can be understood in terms of natural phenomena.

Revelation 16 famously talks about the kings of the world assembling for battle at Armageddon, literally the Hill of Megiddo, in northern Israel, not very far from Nazareth, on the great day of God almighty. And many conservative Evangelical Christians in America believe in a form of dispensationalism which holds

that Christ's return will not occur until all Jewish people have been repatriated to the state of Israel. In the midst of these things, how are we supposed to remain vigilant or watchful for Christ? What are the signs we must look for? And should we even expect something like a literal return of Christ?

Jesus is supposed to have said many things about his return. Frequently, he spoke of the Son of Man returning. This is meant to happen suddenly – just as lightning lights up from one side of the sky to the other. Or we could take our cue from the fig tree – as soon as its leaves are green we know the time is near. But these are opaque, cryptic references not given to easy literal interpretation.

The warning, not only in today's Gospel of the parable of the bridesmaids, but in many other parables and exhortations in the New Testament, is against falling asleep or becoming somehow distracted or weighed down by the cares of this world. It seems to me that much of the vigilance and worry we exercise in light of our fraught context, serves not greater attentiveness to Christ's coming, but distracts us from this, however it may occur.

Though it may seem incidental, the immediate reason for the five bridesmaids missing the arrival of the groom is not that their lamps were out, but that they went to buy more oil. To my mind, practically, the only way we can really prepare for Christ's coming is interiorly. And I know that I have said this in the past, and I realise in practice it is something difficult to achieve, but one of the best ways to do this is through prayer and meditation. In the documentary about the making of *The Book of Joy*, detailing some of the journey's of both the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, when both asked separately what they believed the key to true contentment and peace was, they both replied separately, "meditation".

As all of our lives tail off into a frenetic year-end tizz, and as hard as it may be in light of this, make room for quiet time. Whether this means joining our pre-Advent quiet day on 2 December or going away somewhere quiet for a few days by yourself, or even just cultivating a habit of ten minutes of quiet each morning and evening, this is probably the most feasible way we will keep our wicks burning.

Amen