

Remembrance Sunday – 3rd Sunday before Advent

Cockington

Wisdom 6:12-16 | Thessalonians 4:13-end Matthew 25:1-13

In speaking and listening may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today, we stand with all across our nation who honour the memory of those who have died in conflict so that we have the freedom to be here. We give thanks for the self-giving of those who have died in the defence our nation and those who in our name have died in the pursuit of peace and security on behalf of the vulnerable targeted by destructive aggressors. We recognise the cost of war to those who have been gravely injured in body or mind, and to the families of all who serve and have served in our armed forces. We mourn all killed in war and recognise our deep desire for a time when differences can be resolved without recourse to violence.

The act of pausing, of coming to silence for two minutes, together, is a powerful one – a time for words and debate to stop, a time to find a unity beyond words that holds together gratitude and sorrow, inspiration at human bravery and a desire to find a better tomorrow: “for your tomorrow we gave our today”. That two minutes holds a more eloquent message than any words I can add today.

Remembrance Sunday rarely falls at a time when war is silent. This year we are particularly aware of that with the intense news coverage of the tragic conflict in Israel and Gaza, and the ongoing reports from Ukraine. Even as we stand with those who went before us before us, for whom Armistice Day marked the end to a war they hoped would end all wars, our silence reaches out in yearning for the time when that desire is a reality.

Today’s gospel comes from a series of parables that the writer of Matthew’s gospel gives us towards the end of Jesus’ teaching ministry. They are parables about the Kingdom of heaven which particularly encourage patience, watchfulness and staying alert. They encourage God’s people to remain attentive to God’s will and be really intentional about following it even when it feels like a long wait for the fulfilment of God’s promises. Scholars have speculated that by the time the writer of the gospel was recording these stories this sense of waiting was a powerful one for an early church who had anticipated the return of Jesus sooner rather than later.

Together these parables say: if you are waiting and longing for the transformation of all things under God, do not allow the waiting to distract you, remain alert, remain wise, stay awake!

In today's story, we are offered a choice of reaction to having to wait for the coming of one who brings celebration, joy and unity – the bridegroom. The choice of intentionally gathering the fuel that will enable the light to continue to show the way, or having nothing to fall back on and letting the light go out.

Reading this parable, this year at Remembrance, for me has taken on a particular slant. It was my privilege, yesterday, to listen to the Archbishop of Canterbury as he joined us in Remembrance and offered reflections on peace, at this time.

A couple of times he quoted the United Nations' Secretary General's striking comment in September: "Our world is becoming unhinged" as a description of this time when there is so much that unsettles us, brings anxiety and it is so difficult to see signs of things improving. The Secretary General was calling for international co-operation to address these challenges, with a concern that it was hard to find. I wonder if we feel a bit like that early church who hoped in the great transformation of all things, a transformation so necessary, yet that seemed like it was never coming.

The Archbishop reminded us that Jesus began his ministry in occupied Galilee, in fulfilment of God's promise that that light would come to lands that seemed to be in darkness. Jesus shows us that God's light is stronger than the darkness. This is the source of our hope that all that is destructive and divisive has been and will be transformed in the power of God's love. We can watch for the coming of that Kingdom in its fullest.

The light that overcomes darkness is not something we have to generate for ourselves, it is God's light.

And Archbishop Justin pointed out that when Jesus came the first thing he did was to call disciples to turn towards that light: to repent and believe the good news of God's love through him overcoming all that is evil and then he called them to come with him, to follow him and share in the way he was bringing that light into the world.

We don't generate the light for ourselves, but God seeks us out to share in bringing it into the world. God trusts us to be light bearers: wise bridesmaids with lamps trimmed and well fuelled with oil to keep the light shining even while we wait for the brighter dawning of love's transformation of all things.

If we are those who truly yearn for a time when we no longer need to ask of others to take up the risk and pain of war in our name, we need, like the wise bridesmaids who do all that we can to tend the light of God's love and peace in our midst. The parable reminds us that we each need to take a responsibility for this ourselves, not leaving it to be someone else's problem.

On the eve of the First World War, Sir Edward Grey, as he watched dusk fall from the window of the Foreign Office, said to a friend: "The lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our life-time"

As those who seek to follow Jesus, the Light of the World, the Prince of Peace, we are called to be those who make sure the lamps do not go out, that we have enough oil to keep them alight until God's will for peace on earth is done on earth as it is in heaven.

So how can we make sure that our remembering today is oil for the lamplight we want to shine in the world?

Our communion service gives us a pattern of habits to keep the lamp full of oil:

Here we gather with each other – we remember we are created to be in community. Together we ask God to heal and forgive our failings and the pain we cause each other, together we find that we are forgiven, and released from our own failings we are free to forgive others.

Here together we listen to God's word, to remember God's promise and the hope set before us, and to be guided into the best of who we are, to find inspiration – the gifts of the spirit: generosity, self control, kindness, love – those qualities that our society deeply needs in order to turn towards peace and away from the destructive habits of disregard and conflict.

Here we receive God's transforming presence with us, the gift of a life laid down that we may live. Jesus promises that especially in this act of communion we receive his life, his light, his love, his peace as the source and fuel of all our efforts to live like him.

Here, together we commit ourselves to go out "in the peace of Christ", not just as a comfort for ourselves in a challenging world but as those who bring the actions and spirit of peace to all our relationships and contacts with others – living our today so that for all of us tomorrow is a better day. As today we pray "send us out as a living sacrifice": may it be our prayer that is with God's oil ever filling our lamps we burn as lights of God's peace, in thanksgiving for those who have suffered before us, in love for all with whom we share this world, and in hope that those who follow us will know that peace ever more fully. Amen

