

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

8th November 2020 – Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 25:1-13

READY AND WAITING

Like something from a game show, like Family Feud, I want to start off by asking you this question: What is something we don't worry about it until we need it? Any ideas on your answer? For me, what comes to mind are things such as working batteries in a smoke alarm; candles and spare batteries during a power blackout; our spare car tyre (I wonder how many times RACQ and NRMA get call outs to people whose spare is either flat or completely worn when they find they need it!). One that we could add to the list from this year is: spare toilet paper so that you are ready for pandemic inspired panic buying.

If we were to go back and ask people from Jesus' time 2,000 years ago this same question, they may have answered, 'bridesmaids making sure they have spare oil for their lamps'. Remember that this is a parable we have here today, another of Jesus' made up teaching stories which is based on something all the people of His time knew about and could relate to. In this one, it's about 10 bridesmaids, five of whom were wise and took spare oil for their lamps, and five who were foolish and didn't. It was the bridesmaids' role to firstly prepare and support the bride as she prepared for her wedding, and then, when the bridegroom arrived, to go into the wedding feast and dance until their lamps ran out of oil.

On this occasion the bridegroom is running late; the real point for us being it was unknown when he would arrive, and so the bridesmaids who neglected to be prepared with extra oil found their lamps were empty when he arrived. Their wise companions didn't have enough oil to share around, so the foolish ones had to go and try to buy more. And of course, when they returned later, they were denied entry to the banquet. They weren't ready when the time had come for them to enter in, and so they missed out on going to the feast.

Jesus uses some images here which are often used throughout the Bible: Himself as the bridegroom, the wedding feast as the Kingdom of God, or heaven, and oil and the light of a lamp to symbolise our faith and how it shines out in our lives. It is one of the last parables Jesus told before He died and is one of three in chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel which describes how things will be when Jesus comes again.

These 'the end is coming' parables are popping up now in our Bible readings here in Church because, including this Sunday, we have three Sundays until the end of the Church year. Then, in what is a busy time for many of us, we go through the four Sundays of Advent, Christmas, and then we get to say 'goodbye' to 2020!; 'Thanks for coming, don't come again, and please take all of the rubbish you have brought this year out with you when you leave!' (sadly, this won't happen). It's hard to believe the year is nearly finished, isn't it? I've been caught a few times this week with people talking about preparations they are making for Christmas or next year, and I've asked, 'what are you already worrying about that for?', only to be reminded that we are now in November, and soon it will be December, then 2021 already. It's like everything that has happened, or perhaps more specifically, hasn't happened, this year has got my head out of the normal time frame so I'm not ready for what I know is coming. How about you, are you ready?

Are you ready, and how does that come out in your faith and your life? That is the theme of our readings for both this week and the next two weeks. We spend a lot of our time, and money, and energy getting ready for things like celebrations, careers, retirement, a holiday, the next stage of life, visitors coming, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year. How often does getting ready for Jesus get lost in all of that busyness we get caught up in? Jesus finishes this parable by saying, 'Always be ready! You don't know the day or the time when all this will happen.' (*Matthew 25:13-CEV*) There are lots of similar warnings in the Bible to; 'Be Prepared', 'Be on watch', 'We don't know when He will come', but do we take them seriously? Are we ready?

And then of course, what does that mean, to be ready for Jesus coming again? How do we do that? Well, we don't make ourselves ready, we know that. It doesn't matter how good we might try

to be, we can't begin to hope to get into this feast which is new life with Him through what we do. We remembered last week that despite what the Church was teaching 500 years ago we can't buy our way into heaven with money; a great money-making scheme for the Church, but completely against what God teaches us. When it comes to us being ready, it's all about what God sends down to us, rather than what we try to send up to Him.

What does it mean to be ready? In the basic sense, it means to stay close to God and to be open to and live in all that He gives to us. It's about through Bible reading, prayer, worship, getting together with other Christians, living out our faith by serving others, in these ways allowing God to fill our lamps with oil by allowing the Holy Spirit to come into us. It's reading the Bible and reading and hearing its message explained and so being reminded of God's love for us and His call for our lives. To be ready is to remember our Baptism and the guarantee and promises of His love which God gave us there. It's to come and receive Jesus' body and blood in Holy Communion, and receive that assurance that He died, 'for you', that the price of your sins have all being covered and paid for by His death on the cross. It is God who makes us ready; through His love, through the forgiveness we receive through Jesus, through the Holy Spirit coming continually to fill us with faith in Him.

In my experience, people don't tend to suddenly just fall out of faith with God. That can happen, sadly, because of an experience they have, but like the end of many of our human relationships it tends to be more often be a slow drifting away. It can start with not going to worship as often, neglecting our prayer life and Bible reading, not being encouraged by our Church family. Other things come in; we either get busier by what we have to do, or distracted by what we want to do, and we can just slowly drift away. Of course, until the end it is never too late, but we don't know when that will be. For most, more likely all of us, it will be our death, and who knows when that will be. People sometimes point to the thief on the cross, and other examples they know of, of people who have come back to their faith before they have died and been saved. And that is true: We are saved simply by having faith in Jesus as our Saviour. When it comes to being saved, in the end it

doesn't matter what kind of life we lead, how often we pray or read the Bible, how often we go to Church to worship and be filled up; it's our faith in Jesus which saves us.

But the thief on the cross with Jesus, and those other stories of people who are saved just before they die, are about people who both had the opportunity and the desire for whatever reason to rekindle that faith in their hearts before they died. We can't all guarantee that we will have either or both of those things. You can probably think of people who drifted away from God to the point where they didn't ever think of coming back, sadly. Others whose lives ended in such a way they didn't have time to prepare for anything, let alone what God meant to them. Always be ready.

To that list of things which 'we don't worry about until we need them' that I put up at the beginning, we can sometimes add; our faith in Jesus as our Saviour. In the words of Jesus again, 'Be ready! You don't know the day or time when all this will happen.' This parable and many Bible readings like it are often taught as being strong messages of judgement; be ready or else! But we can look at it as being a story of hope and comfort. God has done what is needed to make us ready for Him. He gives us a hope and love which give us peace in our lives right now; it's not just about being ready for the end, our new life begins right now. And through our faith He gives us the certainty that when we do see Him again, we will be going into the banquet of His kingdom to have eternal life with Him. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Ready

We can be thankful that while there is nothing we can do to make ourselves ready for Jesus coming again, there is nothing we need to do; in Jesus God has done it all for us.

- Think about or share with others what it means to you that God has fully opened the way for you to have new life with Him, and that you need have no fear of when Jesus comes again.
- What are some things you can do to help you hold on to this faith by allowing the Holy Spirit to fill you?

And Waiting

We don't know when Jesus will come again, even though many people have tried to work it out.

- How do you believe God is calling us to spend this 'waiting time'?
- Do you have any thoughts on what Jesus' coming again will be like?
- How do you feel about what is often called 'Judgement Day'; confident, worried, anxious, overjoyed?

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
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