

Sermon Remembrance Sunday 8 November 2020

1 Thessalonians 4.13-18 & Matthew 25.1-13

Here we are, my brothers and sisters, in a second national lockdown. We may feel glad about this step or resigned to it or disappointed or angry or all of the above and more. I wonder whether, as the people of God, at Christ Church, Holy Trinity and St John's, we are like the foolish or the wise bridesmaids; have we gone into this lockdown unprepared or prepared?

I don't so much mean whether we have stocked up on oil equivalents, be they bread-flour or loo roll and clearly we are not called to be like the foolish bridesmaids rushing out to get such things now! But spiritually, were we ready? Certainly, there was a good turnout at Holy Trinity last Sunday; perhaps a consciousness of the last opportunity for a while. For those who have been able to return to worship and have felt comfortable doing that, perhaps indeed these last weeks and months have meant a spiritual re-fuelling; now that we have to go without the sacrament and physical worship together we may be prepared for this lean time.

But given that we are without physical worship, perhaps our state of preparation means returning to some lessons from the first lockdown when we had to pray and worship in our homes, on our own or with our families? I for one found that time fruitful for my own prayer and that of our household. And we have not long kept Bible Sunday, which was important to do in church, but can't all of us do this at home? I am sure many of us do so already, but now could be another opportunity to delve deep into the scriptures in a way that works for us: the Psalms are always a good place to look, while the wider Church cycle of Morning and Evening Prayer is working its way through the likes of Isaiah, Daniel and Revelation.

The Archbishops and Bishop of London have written to us along similar lines and I quote part of their letter now:

'Bearing in mind our primary vocation as the Church of Jesus Christ to pray and to serve **we call upon the Church of England to make this month of lockdown a month of prayer**. More than anything else, whatever the nation thinks, we know that we are in the faithful hands of the risen Christ who knows our weaknesses, tiredness and struggles and whose steadfast love endures for ever.

Above all we recall people to some of the fundamental spiritual disciplines that shape our Christian life. How we do this is up to each congregation and clergy person. We will publish resources to support you before the first day of lockdown. During the first lockdown we cheered for the NHS every Thursday. During this second lockdown we invite you to fast in a way appropriate to you as well as pray for our nation every Thursday, for its leaders, its health and essential services and all those who suffer.'

Spiritual disciplines and fasting on a Thursday might be the last things we need to hear (my household got through a lot of sweets, chocolate, ice-cream and biscuits in the spring!) But first, our leaders simply called us to pray and when we pray, we do so in the risen Christ's presence; it is His work and His gift.

Yet if the wise bridesmaids were prepared and alert, is this what earnest prayer and fasting achieve? And for the latter, there is quite a spectrum. First, it is only one day out of seven. And then, it could mean a severe daytime fast (like our Muslim brothers and sisters throughout Ramadan) or it could be a day as a vegetarian or vegan or it could be a day without snacking; anyway, you get the idea, so ponder the episcopal invitation and feel free to ignore!

The gospel ended, 'Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.' This is the Christian claim to be generally alert and prayerful and in service of our neighbours. I don't think the day and hour, in terms of the second coming, are here as evoked poetically by St Paul in today's first reading; in any case, the archangel wouldn't be allowed to sound his trumpet with COVID-restrictions! But surely this lockdown, this pandemic, the state of the world, the fragility of our brothers and sisters and ourselves all suggest that the time is here in a profound sense. If we don't pray and serve earnestly now, when on earth will we? So please, let us all join our brothers and sisters around the land and the world, in committing to prayer this month. Let our prayers shine like bright and well-trimmed lamps; let them point the way to the Bridegroom; the One who died and rose again for us and for all.

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