

## **Sermon – Pentecost 24**

### **1Thessalonians 4:13-18, Matthew 25:1-13**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

This week, as we edge closer to Christ the King and the end of the lectionary year, our readings lead us into the great Christian hope of resurrected life with Christ. The epistle this week is a segment of the pastoral letter Paul wrote to the Thessalonians early in his ministry. In it he reassures his readers that we will be with the Lord forever and that we should encourage one another with these words. In quite contrasting style is the parable of the ten bridesmaids, perhaps more accurately translated as the ten young women, taken from Jesus' apocalyptic fifth discourse in Matthew, told in the last week before his betrayal. As I pondered these two readings, I wanted to dwell on Paul's letter, for its beauty and also its relevance today, in a year when we have all been touched by friends and family who have gone to God before us. Paul's letter takes on a distinctly pastoral feel and it seemed to speak to me as I read it, a letter of hope and encouragement. But I also felt that we couldn't ignore the parable of the ten young women, so here is my attempt to reflect on both of these readings which speak into one subject but in very different ways.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is considered to be the oldest text in the New Testament. Paul, along with Timothy and Silas established the church in Thessalonica early in his ministry after their mission to Philippi and before going on to establish the church in Corinth, from where he wrote this letter. The overall themes of the letter include that how we live our

everyday lives matters, and that we should live in holiness, in preparation for Christ's return, the timing of which is unknown. Our reading today from chapter 4 is near the end of the letter and are clear words of encouragement to the community in Thessalonica. It says:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.

Some years ago, after I was ordained, one of my dear friends and a former colleague died. She was only a couple of months older than me and died from returning breast cancer, something which is never far from my own mind. I went to her secular service at a funeral home chapel, and was struck by how it was bereft of any hope for those who were mourning. It was such a sad service completely lacking any kind of reassurance or hope that our dear friend Robyn was now safely in the arms of God, or indeed that we who remain can also look forward to life ongoing after this one passes. This experience made me so grateful that as people of God we can say, as we do in the Anglican funeral service, that:

Christians believe that those who die in Christ share eternal life with him.

We will always grieve when loved ones die but as Paul says here, we will not grieve as others do, who have no hope. God transforms our hopeless grief into hope filled grief. And Paul expands on this in the very next line when he says.

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

But Paul's letter is not just about consoling grieving mourners. In echoes of Isaiah he writes:

For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

As a man of his time, 2000 years ago, Paul's writing is steeped in Jewish apocalyptic images and the conception of a three tiered universe, but the punchline "we will be with the Lord forever" applies to us all. And as Paul says, we should "Therefore encourage one another with these words".

I find the epistle today very encouraging. This year, I have taken seven funerals, so far, all of people who have been connected to our community, some of whom were indelibly part of us. We know that we won't be seeing Tricia or Sam or Gaye or Katherine again in this life. For many of us, the grief is real and profound. But we can all have hope and take comfort that they are with God and that one day we too will be with them in God's loving embrace.

Earlier in chapter 4 of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, Paul encourages the people to be holy and to live a life pleasing to God. And this too is the message in the parable of the ten young women. Spoken in his final week in Jerusalem, Jesus uses this parable to encourage people to be ready for the second coming of the Son of Man. The theme is introduced earlier in chapter 24 of Matthew's Gospel and graphically displayed in this parable at the beginning of chapter 25. Using familiar motifs of the wedding and the

banquet, the bridegroom and the bridesmaids, Jesus makes the point that, just in time readiness is not good enough. As his disciples, we are all called to do the work that Jesus has given us to do, such as loving our enemies, and our neighbours as ourselves. The future is unknown, so we need to make sure we are making good in the present.

When I read this parable, I often have questions. Where is the bride? Why is the bridegroom late? Why don't the young women share the oil? Why doesn't the bridegroom let the girls in? Perhaps that's the role of a parable, to pose questions and make you think more! As I reflected, I found some interesting points to be made. Firstly, all the girls, whether they were wise or foolish fell asleep. In some ways, this reminds me of the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane who fell asleep while Jesus prayed on his last night. It wasn't the end of the story for them was it? Our God is a generous and forgiving God of grace who knows our weaknesses and our flaws. And I think falling asleep on the job, so to speak, is quite common. How many of us have been caught out?

Secondly, I think the point about the girls who left, is just that! The girls who didn't have enough oil, chose not to trust in God, chose to take matters in their own hands and leave. This meant that they weren't even present when the Lord arrived. I think the big point of this parable is that we must be present to our God. It might be that we fall asleep, it might even be that our lamps don't have enough oil, but we must not absent ourselves from God, we must be there.

Earlier in chapter 24, Jesus says about the coming of the Son of Man "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor

the Son, but only the Father". We are all called to wait patiently and be prepared for that time, which will come in God's time.

Our readings today point to the mystery of our faith. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. As we move into a new church year, new programs, hopefully new people, families and children, how are you preparing for Christ coming again? How are you preparing to welcome new life into our community so that we indeed become Welcoming, God centered and thriving?