

Sermon - Preparing to see the Kingdom of Heaven

Based on Amos 5.18-24 and Matthew 25.1-13 (NRSV)

An assignment to engage with the unfamiliar

- While I was living in England, I undertook part-time studies and training for ordained ministry.
- In the third year, we each had to find a placement parish, which we were expected to participate in for long enough to get a sense of how that particular faith community functioned.
- Part of the requirement was to find a parish that was very different to what each of us was familiar with - to experience being out of our comfort zones, and challenged by a different theological emphasis and way of worship.
- This experience was to form the basis of an evaluative assignment - evaluating not just the different perspective of the placement parish, but also our own response to that.
- Well, for me, this was quite problematic.
- As I explained to the director of our course, I had already done that many times and engaged with a wide variety of ecclesiologies - from traditional to contemporary, from cathedral and suburban to rural, from anglo-catholic to evangelical and charismatic, or participated in church communities with a different culture, language or ethnicity.
- Every time he suggested another available option, I had to say 'Been there, done that.'
- So he dubiously accepted my proposal, which was to live in a Benedictine Abbey, conveniently close to my home.

The monk at Douai

- Douai Abbey, in Woolhampton Berkshire, had had to move from Douai in France in 1903 due to discriminatory laws against religious communities.
- I had an introduction to the new abbot, Geoffrey Scott, who is still the abbot there, and he was happy for me to effectively be part of that Roman Catholic monastic community for a short time.
- I shadowed a few of the monks as they went about their daily routine and responsibilities,
- One of them kept saying that he needed to prepare for a seminar that he was due to present, even as he was continually distracted by other matters.
- After a couple of days I attended his seminar, for which he had pulled together a presentation of slides apparently late the night before.
- His presentation turned out to be well-prepared after all, and so I questioned him about this, thinking that he had been unintentionally deceiving me about his lack of preparation - but he assured me otherwise.
- I then realised that the subject matter actually related to what he had been living and reflecting on in his life at the abbey - and so, in that sense, he had effectively been preparing his presentation from long before.

The parable of the bridesmaids

- I think it is this kind of lived-out preparation that Jesus was referring to in his parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids.
- This story that Jesus tells uses a wedding tradition of that time that modern scholars don't have a record of, so they have had to 'read between the lines' of Jesus story, for the context.
- The term 'bridesmaid' used here is more of a convenient translation of the Greek word *parthenos*, which means young person - usually woman - of marriageable age.
- It seems that these young women would possibly wait outside the bride's home, welcome the bridegroom as he came to fetch his bride, and then escort the couple back to his home through the dark streets, where the wedding ceremony would then be performed.

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- The lamps that the women carried to light the way are more accurately translated as torches - having burning oil-soaked rags in a container on the end of a rod, that would withstand any outdoor gusts.
- The other detail where we need to adjust our understanding, is when Jesus says at the end of this story '*Keep awake therefore*' (Matt 25.13).
- All ten bridesmaids had fallen asleep, but it was the five foolish ones who weren't prepared that Jesus was describing as not having been '*awake*' - that is, alert enough to their situation to have been prepared for it, in the way the five wise ones were.
- The monk at Douai Abbey had been better prepared than he had credited himself with being, so that when he found himself having to step up and deliver his presentation, he was able to rise to the occasion effectively.
- I think that this is what Jesus is calling us to - to be alert to the need to be prepared for what should be expected, rather than finding ourselves completely unprepared for the awaited moment.

Preparing for the day of the Lord

- Of course this also means being aware of what it is that we need to be prepared for.
- The reading from the prophecy of Amos highlights this aspect, as it starts with:

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!
Why do you want the day of the Lord?
It is darkness, not light; (Amos 5.18-19)
- The people of God think they know what's coming - what *the day of the Lord* is all about.
- And they seem to think it is enough for them to be religious - to religiously observe the festivals, hold solemn assemblies, and make offerings in worship.
- But Amos announces what God's judgement will be on *the day of the Lord*: as if escaping a lion but meeting a bear instead, or looking for support from a wall, only to be bitten by a snake.
- The passage ends by explaining what's missing: that all the religiosity has not translated into justice and righteousness.
- Outside of their religious gatherings, God's people have not made sure that their lives were right-wise - rightly aligned to God.
- And they have not practised justice in their dealings with others, or addressed injustice against others.
- What is implied here is that God's people thought they were preparing well for *the day of the Lord* - or for the wedding and wedding banquet, to use Jesus' metaphor.
- However, Amos points out that their religiosity was *not* the necessary preparation: rather that being right-wise and enacting justice was the preparation required.
- This is similar to the foolish bridesmaids, wanting to be admitted to the wedding feast after having missed the wedding itself, and finding themselves not able to gain entry.

Kingdom of Heaven is where we are

- Now last Sunday, when we observed All Saints Day, I explained my understanding of the kingdom of heaven - based on Scripture - as being here and now.
- I pointed to the Scriptures which describe us as being surrounded by the saints in heaven, and how Jesus promises to be present with us, here and now, even while he is enthroned in heaven.
- Here's a more contemporary metaphor for this concept: I remember attending disco's when I was a young adult, and one of the regular tricks was for the DJ to turn off the lighting, and only have ultraviolet lights on.
- The UV light would show up white and lighter-coloured clothing, or the whiter-coloured patterns in what people were wearing, and allowed the rest of the clothing, or patterns, to go dark.

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- So suddenly, although the scene on the dance floor hadn't altered, the appearance of everything changed radically, so one was seeing clothing and shapes in a new way, even though they had been there all along.
- We can imagine the kingdom of heaven being a bit like that: it is here and now, but we need to have a different light - a divine light - in order to perceive it.
- Now if we link it in to the story of the bridesmaids, with heaven being represented by the wedding banquet - then the five wise bridesmaids were those who had prepared themselves properly to be able to see how to get to the wedding.
- They were wise enough to have the oil for their torches, that would help to light the way to the wedding feast - that is, they had prepared themselves to be able to see, and participate in, the kingdom of heaven.
- Whereas the foolish ones were not prepared, and could not see heaven, and by the time they finally figured out what was needed and tried to make their way into the kingdom, they had missed the wedding, and their chance to join in the celebration.

Preparation is living the Beatitudes

- The Gospel reading last Sunday was from chapter 5 in Matthew's account, where Jesus gives us the Beatitudes.
- And in them Jesus teaches us that it is in striving to follow these disciplines that enables us to perceive and enter heaven - because by actively doing these things we are enacting, making manifest, the heavenly realm.
- If Amos had had the Beatitudes at hand when he was speaking his prophetic words, it is likely that he would have quoted them as being the proper preparation for meeting *the day of the Lord* - because what Amos describes as needed is effectively contained within the Beatitudes.
- This short summary is a helpful reminder of the eight attitudes of the heart that Jesus lists:
 1. recognising our need of God;
 2. being responsive to injustice;
 3. being humble;
 4. wanting to be aligned with God's will;
 5. being compassionately forgiving;
 6. having full integrity;
 7. enacting wholeness; and
 8. blessing others even at one's own cost.
- All of these were the attitudes of Jesus, rather than the mere religiosity of the people Amos speaks to.
- To be clear, there can be great value in religious activity, but it is insufficient preparation by itself.
- When we respond to Jesus' invitation to aspire to his heart attitudes, then we will be like the wise bridesmaids, or the monk at Douai, and find that we *are* prepared.
- That we have the light that enables us to escort our Lord as he fetches his bride, the Church, through the dark streets to his home.
- That we have the light that will enable us not to fear the darkness when *the day of the Lord* is at hand.
- And that we are thus able to enter in, to celebrate the marriage of our Lord, and participate in the heavenly banquet.