

Be Prepared!

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 9 November 2014, by David Gill. The readings were Joshua 24:1-3a,14-15, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and St Matthew 25:1-13.

On Tuesday, people in a number of countries, our own included, will observe Remembrance Day. This year, the centenary of the outbreak of World War 1, the focus will be, more than ever, on the carnage that started in 1914.

Many things about the First World War are noteworthy. But the most remarkable, surely, is the strange way it started. Almost by accident.

Yes, the imperial powers had been jostling each other, as they vied for world supremacy. And yes, there was an arms build-up, always a danger sign. But when a young Yugoslav nationalist shot an Austrian archduke, on 28th June 1914, nobody expected a great war would follow.

The assassination itself was no big deal, except for the late archduke himself I guess. There seemed no reason to panic. Just another spat in the Balkans, which goes in for a lot of these things. For a while, life in Europe continued pretty much as normal. It would all be sorted out, everyone assumed.

But it wasn't. Diplomatic muscles were flexed. Patriotic posturing intensified. Alliances were activated. Armies were mobilised. The runaway train towards war picked up speed. Eventually it proved unstoppable. A month after the assassination came the first declaration of war, by Austria against Serbia. Other declarations soon followed. More than four years would pass and 16 million would die before the bloodbath stopped.

And nobody had seen it coming. Incredible.

In today's gospel, Jesus talks about that very issue: the importance of being ready. Live expectantly, he says, opting for a much happier analogy than mine. He chooses not a war but a party.

A wedding party. Ten girls arrive early. Their job is to welcome the bridegroom. They must have been looking forward to it: the pleasant company, the good food, the happy gathering. It is evening so of course they bring their lamps. Reliable lamps. They had shone so well in the past. No worries about those lamps.

Well, actually, just one small worry. Lamps need something to burn. The groom has been delayed. At last, around midnight, they hear him approaching, but

some of the girls realise their lamps are flickering a bit. They hadn't brought enough oil. They scuttle off to buy some, which at midnight can't have been easy. In their absence, the groom arrives and the festivities get under way. Eventually the girls return, but -- too late. The bouncer won't let them in. The door is shut.

The point of the story? It sounds a bit like Baden Powell and his motto for the Scouting movement: "Be prepared!" Be ready, says Jesus. But he wasn't talking to a bunch of scouts. Be ready for what? Who is Jesus aiming at with this warning? And what is he driving at?

There are a number of "wake up!" calls like this towards the end of Matthew's gospel. Separately and together, they are vulnerable to two misreadings.

First, such passages have been a happy hunting ground, through the ages, for pious believers and others who imagine they can predict the end of the world. We had a burst of that a few years ago, you may remember, in the year 2000. Some tried to convince us that the arrival of the third millennium meant the end of everything, so off they went to sit on mountain tops to watch the fun. People seem to love gazing into their tea leaves, or into a crystal ball, or even into Bible verses, as they try to foretell the end.

Jesus does not belong to that brigade. He is not trying to whip up speculation about the future, indeed he specifically discourages it. He wants people to keep the faith now.

The second all-too-common misreading has people focusing on divine judgement. Ah ha, God is accepting some but penalising others. Who among us will be admitted to the party, who locked out, and why?

But remember the man who is telling this story. Jesus slams the door on nobody. As his listeners were well aware, the man of Nazareth was well known for having his door always open – to children, to "sinners", to Samaritans, to outsiders of every kind. Indeed, he was getting himself into big trouble for that very reason. He lived a message of God's inclusive love. Don't twist it into a message of exclusion.

So who is this story aimed at? And what is its point?

Some of the warning stories towards the end of Matthew's gospel target those who were failing to respond to Jesus' message. In this one, however, Jesus

seems to be talking in-house, telling his own followers they had better remain on their toes.

It is Christians who find themselves barred from the wedding feast. Having once followed Jesus is no guarantee of a place at the table. We are the ones being told to stay awake, lest we exclude ourselves from the great feast to which we've been invited.

Why?

Because the kingdom of God is here, now. It is pressing in upon us. The world we see around us is on the way out. The rule of God is on the way in. People would have made the connection when he talked about a banquet. A great feast is the image used elsewhere for the great and glorious kingdom that is bursting in upon us.

Still today, in ritualised form, Christians recall that image when we gather for the Lord's Supper. Holy Communion is not a mournful remembering of what was, but a joyful celebration of what is and what will be. The Eucharist doesn't just have us looking backwards, with gloomy faces, to the trauma of Jesus' final days. It celebrates his rising, and looks forward to what will be the great party to end all parties! Hence the joyful beginning of our great prayer of thanksgiving. You know it: "Lift up your hearts! We lift them up to the Lord! Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give our thanks and praise."

It sure is.

God's rule is real, so live for it. God's rule is near, so prepare for it. Don't let life's confusions distract you, its routine bore you or its burdens overwhelm you. A new day is coming. A new order is approaching. Look for it. Live for it. Don't let it catch you napping.

And us?

For us today's gospel is a warning against spiritual slackness. Exactly what that might mean for me is for me to say. What it might mean for you is for you to say. We're all different. But we're all human too. All vulnerable to losing God amidst the routine, the everydayness of things. All given to sleepwalking our way through life. All tempted to slacken off our following of Christ.

All likely, from time to time, to let the lamps run dry. So check your lamp. Just because it burned well in the past doesn't mean it's in good shape to burn for you now.

Or, to change the image, where is it that you need to take up the slack? Don't tell me – tell yourself. Then do something to fix it.

From time to time, every congregation should ask the same question. Where do we as a church need to tighten our self-discipline? Our spiritual exercises – prayer, bible study, reflection, attendance at worship? Our interpersonal relationships – mutual forbearance, forgiveness, caring? Our openness to others – moving beyond comfort zones, scrapping ancient prejudices, welcoming new faces at the front door? Our openness to the future, to change?

Separately and together, right now, we are confronted by the awesome mystery of grace. Be awake to it! And enjoy the party!

Thanks be to God.

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