

32C 2023 SFX
Remembrance Sunday

Today's parable is curious. The final message seems easy – "*Stay awake*" and yet all ten of the bridesmaids grew drowsy and fell asleep. The wise bridesmaids had brought with them extra supplies of oil should the arrival of the Bridegroom be delayed. Which he was. At midnight the cry goes up! The Bridegroom has arrived! But the five foolish bridesmaids struggled to keep their lamps lit, and have to go off to the shop to replenish their stocks.

At this point the wise ones might appear like rather selfish and smug girl guides, refusing to share their oil, as the foolish ones are shut out from the party. We might be troubled that they seem a bit selfish. Who would want to be at a party where they drone on about how clever they had been. Indeed, would we want to go into a party with a delayed suitor who slams the door in the face of our friends?

But that is perhaps to over-analyze the parable, and we are perhaps not to think about those details. This is a parable about our spiritual preparedness, not a lesson on the Golden Rule. And unlike oil, spiritual preparedness is not something we can transfer to another person. The point is we should furnish ourselves with oil before going to sleep, while we have the chance.

This is a parable about the end times. It takes place at midnight, the hour of liberation when God freed his people from Egypt. The Bridegroom surely represents Jesus, and the message we are left with is simply that we need to be spiritually prepared, stand ready with the good works of Christian discipleship, because it is not those who, like those foolish maidens, say "Lord, Lord," not those who simply pay lip service, who are ready to meet their Lord.

Such parables challenge us all, and we need them. But there are other passages in the Gospels which might bring us some spiritual comfort if we feel far from ready to meet the Lord. If we think of Jesus on the Cross we realize that he was not waiting for our own righteousness to save us. And we can think of his companion on Calvary, the so-called Good Thief, who had no of achievements to present to Jesus, only his poor sins. If we had to relying on our own good works, our own readiness, where would we be. With the foolish five locked out in the rain.

But the Good Thief gives us hope because he may not be up to much, his own sins would rightly find him guilty. But there on Calvary he realises that it is not about him. It is about Jesus.

"**Jesus**" he says boldly. There is no other person in any of the four gospels who dares address the Lord by his personal name alone. "Jesus" he says. "Jesus" means "God saves." '**Jesus remember me.**' We might just remember the simple unadorned intimacy of those words. Here was this criminal hanging on his cross who simply asks to be remembered. Which is to say he is not asking Jesus to have fond thoughts about this dying stranger, or to picture him in his mind when enjoys the fruits of his Kingdom. Rather he is asking for the gifts of a new reality, of being re-membered,

put back together in the Kingdom, of sharing the resurrection life. Jesus doesn't merely bring the man to mind: he brings him to life.

And today we remember, the dead of the great wars, and all the conflicts that have troubled our earth. We remember them, and in remembering bring back to the present their sacrifice and suffering for we owe them a debt that we can never repay. *Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun and in the morning. We will remember them.* In remembering, we pray that they are alive to God for all eternity, knowing that peace for which they fought on earth.

We give thanks for the preparedness, the courage, the bravery of so many men and women, of different nations who did more than pay lip-service, but put their lives on the line so that others, we could enjoy peace, prosperity and happiness.

Those who visit the British and Commonwealth and similar war cemeteries and see the rows and rows of white headstones are often reduced to silence especially when they see the ages of those who died. It is hard not to shed a tear at the Canadian Major John McCrae's poem *In Flanders Fields*, written on a scrap of paper in May 1915, during the Second Battle of Ypres.

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

On All Souls Day Pope Francis went to the British and Commonwealth war cemetery in Rome. It stands at the foot of the Aventine hill where I lived for a number of years, a peaceful and poignant garden.

Pope Francis passed the lines of white headstones and laid flowers at a grave, and in his Mass homily spoke from the heart, without notes:

"I would like to dwell on something that happened to me at the entrance", he said. "I was looking at the age of these fallen soldiers. The majority died between 20 and 30. Lives cut short, lives without a future, here."

"I thought of the parents," he said, "the mothers who received that letter: 'Madam, I have the honour of informing you that your son is a hero.' 'Yes, a hero, but they took him away from me.'" "So many tears in these lives cut short."

Looking at these graves, Pope Francis added: "I could not help but think of today's wars... "so many deaths. Life is destroyed without any awareness."

"Wars are always a defeat. Always." "Let us pray to the Lord for our dead," he urged, "for everyone. May the Lord receive them all." "And may the Lord also have mercy on us and give us hope"

He speaks for us all. May we learn the lessons of the past, of those great wars. Why can't we human being learn to live in peace?