

## **8<sup>th</sup> November 2020 6pm Keep Watch!**

Service led by Emma Latham, Sermon by Rob Latham

Bible readings by Emma Latham and Rosie Lee. Prayers by David Hewitt

*This transcript is only of the notices, readings, talk and act of remembrance.*

### **Notices**

[Emma:] So first of all, we are all in lockdown. So our churches once again closed, I'm afraid, but I think Rosie has some news for us.

[Rosie:] Yes, good evening, everybody. I've just got one announcement for Quiet Space. During November only for the moment, Quiet Space will be restarting on Wednesday, 11th of November from 10am to 2pm. And then on Sunday 11am to 3pm. Thank you.

[Emma:] Thank you, Rosie. And Rob.

[Rob:] Okay. I think most people have heard by now that we are organising some prayers on the Abbey Fields on Friday afternoons, half past two. We've met three times now. In the lockdown scenario, we do have to make sure we only are paired at most, or pray on our own. But we meet in a dispersed fashion and you'd like to come, we'd be very pleased to see you, 2:30 to 3:00. If you don't have the contact number, you can get it from the admin office in the church.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Reading: 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18**

**13** Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. **14** For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. **15** According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. **16** For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. **17** After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever. **18** Therefore encourage one another with these words.

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Matthew 25: 1-13**

**1** 'At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. **2** Five of them were foolish and five were wise. **3** The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. **4** The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. **5** The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

**6** 'At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"

**7** 'Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. **8** The foolish ones said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out."

**9** "'No," they replied, "there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves."

**10** 'But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were

ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

11 'Later the others also came. "Lord, Lord," they said, "open the door for us!"

12 'But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I don't know you."

13 'Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

## **Sermon**

[Rob Latham:]

Good evening. And let us pray.

May I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't know whether anybody stumbled over that word in the middle of the beginning of the second verse of our first hymn<sup>1</sup>, "Here I raise my Ebenezer." It might be worthwhile just pointing out, it's a reference to a time when a leader of the Israelites in the Old Testament placed an upright stone as a stone of witness to his faithfulness to God. So there you are, it's a stone of witness. "Here I raise my Ebenezer," it's you making a declaration in that hymn that we raise our own stone of witness.

I'd like to talk first, though, about sleeping. My son was born in sleep almost, in fact, his Auntie used to call him the Archangel Gabriel, simply because he was such a good boy. And one reason why that was because every time you wanted him to be restful and go to sleep, he would be very easily rocked to sleep. And in fact, you could just have woken him up from sleep and to give his arms a rock before he'd promptly fall asleep again. So he was always very ready for bedtime. I recall myself having a number of occasions having some problems with sleep. I recall on my 21st birthday, having partied the night before with my friends from social work, and came home quite late, well, early in the morning, I went to bed. When I got up, all I could do was just to sleep, and I slept pretty much all of the day on the lounge floor. Probably just as well it was in the middle of July. And then another one, which is a slightly more amusing anecdote, during a confirmation class that I used to do late Saturday afternoons, with just one candidate, his name was Bill. And when Bill came to talk with me, by the end of the session, you could guarantee that I was falling asleep. And I would have to apologise to him. If I saw Bill, he would remind me of that and have a very broad smile on his face.

So why am I talking about sleep? Well, there is a connection with both readings, good and bad, about sleep. The first thing is to tell you that in the first reading from Thessalonians, it strikes a chord with me, simply because it was a reading that I would often choose to read at funerals. I would struggle to find a reading that was most appropriate, because many of the readings that we might normally choose were not always suitable for, well, particularly for crematorium funerals, because they spoke of too much of anticipation of the hope that comes from being a Christian. And while this one does, it nevertheless had a particular connection, which I felt I could exploit for the benefit of my listeners on these occasions. And it's simply the fact that Paul begins that letter by saying, don't worry about death, if you don't have any hope, because those who have died already have fallen asleep.

And I'm thinking, even as I read it, I kind-of shock myself: there are times when we ought to allow Scriptures to have a big impact on us and connect with

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1 The hymn was *Come Thou Fount of every blessing*

that, but I'm always shocked – probably it's too strong a word – but it's always a kind of surprising, powerful thing to think of death as falling asleep. Because we're in good company here. Because Jesus uses the metaphor on a number of occasions, you might recall that when He was summoned to the home of Jairus, to heal his daughter, and the message came that she was dead, Jesus simply comforted Jairus by saying<sup>2</sup>, "Don't listen to them. She's only asleep." And everybody else hearing that laughed at Him. But when Jesus went into the room, He took her hand, He said, *talitha kumi*, which means 'little girl arise', and she woke up. And also, when His big friend, good friend, Lazarus, fell asleep some distance away, when he died, He used the same expression, first to His disciples, saying<sup>3</sup>, "Lazarus has fallen asleep" and they thought, "Oh, well, he'll have a good rest, he'll wake up and be much better." But Jesus actually meant he'd died. And then a little while later, He said, "Let us go wake him up again." And of course, they travelled to Bethany to where he'd been buried, and there that Jesus called Him from the dead and woke him up. So I think it's a wonderful way of thinking about our own death and dying, that we simply fall asleep in this world, with the anticipation of course that we will wake in the next.

But then Paul goes on to talk about the hope that we have in the resurrection of Jesus. And how at the end of the age when the trump will sound for the return of Jesus, first, the dead in Christ will rise, and then we who are left will be caught up together with them in the air. And we'll all be together with the Lord forever. Yes, what greater awakening could we have, but to have that hope of that eternal life? You know, just as a caution here, eternal life doesn't begin when Jesus returns, it actually begins here and now, so that we are actually beginning eternal life once we are connected and filled with the Spirit of God, connected with Jesus and know His resurrection within us right now. It's a present-day experience that has its fulfilment in the time to come.

Strangely, the Gospel reading also has a connection with last days. We have a wonderful parable of a wedding feast. I'm immensely grateful to an understanding of this parable that was given to me when I was doing a short course in South Africa in 2004. I'm going to try and share a little bit about that now. In a wedding situation, in a traditional Jewish wedding scenario, the father of the bride seeks to arrange to have the most suitable of the suitors of his daughter, to be actually be the person that he would invite to talk to his daughter about getting married. The selected bridegroom, no doubt, has been chosen not just by the father, but by, I guess, by the daughter's own considerations. But ultimately, it's the father who actually makes this arrangement and he bids the daughter to wait in her room, and he sends the prospective bridegroom into her bedroom to have a conversation about whether they will actually get married. During that time, they share together. But what the bride has prepared, is that in that room will also be a cup, a glass, of wine. And if she is willing to accept the person that her father has accepted, as her bridegroom, as her future spouse, husband, she drinks the wine and the contract is formed. And then the preparations begin. And that means that the bridegroom has to go off and make suitable preparations for them to have a home, and a place where he can take his bride to make all the necessary arrangements for the marriage then to go ahead. This can take a long time, nobody knows quite how long it's going to take the groom to set everything in place.

And so everybody else is set waiting. The bride herself prepares herself, she brings and lays out her dress, she lights a lamp and puts that in the window, so that everybody knows that she is expecting to marry. And her attendants will be part of this as well. In the reading, we heard Rosie described them from the NIV as virgins. In the New Revised Standard Version, they're called bridesmaids. It matters not: they are effectively the same thing. But we have now this elongated waiting period where everybody's waiting for the bridegroom to come back. And if

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2 Matthew 9:24, Mark 5:39, Luke 8:52

3 John 11:11

he's all efficient, and everything goes well, it could be he would return quite quite quickly. But if he's not, it could take a bit of time. And the waiting goes on, and the waiting goes on. And here we find the parable looks into what is happening among these 10 bridesmaids. We discovered fairly early that five of them are foolish, and five are wise. You know, filling time, when there's a massive void, isn't necessarily the easiest thing to do. I'm just trying to think of the name of the BBC television newsreader who had to fill time when Boris Johnson was wanting to speak to the nation, and it wasn't until about three hours later that he arrived on the scene and everybody says how good a job that she did. Well, we're not talking about three hours here, we're talking about potentially days, maybe even weeks, but we'll say it's days. And we find that to fill this particular void, all of the bridesmaids just take a little bit of a nap. Well, maybe a longer nap.

The important thing is, when you have a nap and I've discovered this to my cost, you really ought to make sure that the next thing you're going to do is actually already ready to run as soon as you wake up. Another one of my falling asleep episodes saw me preparing myself for an evening service at a United Reformed Church in Leicester when I was a lay person. And I thought right, everything's ready. I sat down in my easy chair and thought "I'll just sit for a minute or two before I start and go out," and fell fast asleep. And suddenly I woke up with a start, probably about five minutes before the service was due to begin. I'd still got to get out, get in the car, drive to the place and arrive. Well, I was probably a good 20 minutes or so late. And I still hadn't woken up even by the time I started preaching. But there you go. It's a dangerous thing, isn't it, falling asleep? And we realise fairly quickly that the reason why five of these virgins/bridesmaids were wise is because they had come prepared for a long wait, particularly if they actually had had a restful nap, as they did, they had brought extra oil. And they were ready, because the cry had been given out that the bridegroom was on his way back, and would not be long arriving. So they checked their oil and they were ready. And everything for them was all set to proceed. As for the foolish, this is how they got to be called foolish, woke up, they discovered a big problem. They had failed to plan. And we all know failing to plan is planning to fail. So they discovered that actually, they were running rather short of oil.

"Lend us some of your oil, please. We haven't got enough! We're running out! What on earth are we going to do? Oh, no!" cried the foolish virgins. The wise virgins said "No, we don't know, yet, even now, the bridegroom could be delayed. He might take a while to get here. Or there may be other issues." They simply were unable to share what they had. And they told the foolish virgins, they had to go off and buy some more. Just a point here for anybody who thinks that the wise virgins were really being really mean. Of course Christian hospitality and Christian generosity is an important part of our faith. You know, there are some things that we can't share. And I think that the oil represented exactly that. I can share my faith. But if you trusted my faith, rather than your own, you've got a problem. You need to find faith for yourself, so that you can trust with me.

Anyway, be that as it may, the foolish virgins go off to buy some more oil. And just as they'd gone, the bridegroom arrives. And everybody was called into the feast and there was much rejoicing, and in go the wise virgins to share this great celebration with the bride and his crew. And then the door is shut. And then, we don't know how long later, the foolish ones return. "Open to us! Open to us! We were nearly ready. We weren't it wasn't our fault. How on earth can we get in?" And the reply comes from inside, "Go away. I never knew you." They lose their opportunity of being part of the feast.

You know, it's very important that, as we consider last days, as we look forward to that glorious resurrection of our own selves into the Kingdom, of meeting the Lord in the air whenever it will happen, of being with Him forever, that we are

actually ready for that event. Jesus constantly tells us to be on our guard and to be alert and to be ready and to read the signs of the time. And you know, just think about it, in Communion, we're invited by the bridegroom to drink the bride's cup. We drink the fruit of the vine that is a foretaste of a heavenly banquet prepared for all people.

So are you a wise or a foolish person? Are you equipped? Are you ready for the coming of the King? Have you got enough oil stashed away? Are your reserves of faith and understanding, your ability to endure well stocked up? Because you need to make sure they are. The God of love calls us to be in His Kingdom. He desires that from the bottom of His heart. But we are totally disrespectful if we just treat that as though we're just going to walk over the threshold without a care in the world. His love requires our love to grow in us, our love for Him to be fully developed. And may you also be led into that fullness of love, and be ready when He comes.  
Amen.

## **Act of Remembrance**

[Robert:]

So, as it's Remembrance Sunday today, we're going to mark this with a time of silence. It will be top-and-tailed with words that are familiar. And also we shall have a short prayer at the end. So let us just be still for a moment.

Let us remember before God and commend to his sure keeping those who have died for their country in conflict, those who we knew and whose memory we treasure, and all who have lived and died in the service of humanity.

They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old.  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them.  
We will remember them.

Let us have the silence.



When you go home, tell them of us and say,  
For your tomorrow, we gave our today.

Let us pray.

Most merciful and ever-living God, we remember those whom you have gathered from the storm of war into the peace of your presence. Grant that we, being faithful to death, may receive with them the crown of life that never fades. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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