

We've just had a family wedding, that was probably 18 months in the making. There was only one bridesmaid, and funnily enough she didn't have an oil lamp. The gospel reading today sounds slightly alien to us, and you may well be sitting here thinking, not sure what this means, or indeed why its read, today, on Remembrance Sunday. Jesus tells a parable, a story, a once upon a time story, about something which would be very familiar to his Palestinian readers – a village wedding. Ten girls would be asked to accompany the bride as she awaited the arrival of the bridegroom. The problem was that they had no idea when the bridegroom would turn up and, when it got dark, they would need to have lighted lamps. If the bride's companions were caught unawares, if they were not around when the bridegroom came, they could be locked out or left behind. And no one wants to be locked out or left behind. We watched again the 2007 film, 'I am legend' last week. Its not a particularly nice film, based on a 1957 novel, about a virus that almost wipes out humanity leaving a few people behind!

I mean, what an unrealistic notion!

But most of the film is about one doctor living alone in New York desperately trying to find someone. Will Smith really does play the part very well, the pain of loneliness is tangible. But this is a common thread in novels and films, being the last one left, being left behind, being left alone. Its all very well being a survivor, but who really wants to be the only one left?

Remembrance Sunday draws our attention to the effects of war and conflict, which often brings separation to one degree or another. We think of those who gave their lives fighting for another's freedom, and later we shall read out the names of those who gave their lives in ww1 and ww2 from Stoke D'Abernon, we think of those fleeing

from terror becoming refugees, we think of those who are left behind to face the brokenness that war has created. Some Remembrance Sundays are easier to talk at than others. This year is not an easy one, because as we sit here peacefully, whilst our brothers and sisters around the world are facing the awful reality of war now, making the hardest decisions any of us could ever make, do I fight? do we stay? do I take my family out of here? But where do we go? Who do we take, who do we leave behind?

Jesus' story of the bridesmaids and their lamps is a strange story for Remembrance Sunday, its not about love, or avoiding conflict, its about being prepared, being ready. After Jesus died the early followers of Jesus believed he would return in their lifetime, heralding the end of the world, where he would take them to be with him in heaven, with him for eternity, where there would be no more terror, but joy and peace for evermore. But by the time Matthew wrote his Gospel, his account of Jesus' life, the belief of Jesus returning any time soon was diminishing. During the last 2 millennia the thought of Jesus returning has waxed and waned, usually corresponding to what's going on in the world, when society is prosperous no one thinks about it, when the world faced the war to end all wars, the second coming was thought about a lot. Is this the end of the world? Will Jesus return? Will he return and take us out of this chaos?

There has been much speculation about when the end of the world will be or whether indeed there will be an end of the world. What is certain, is that there will be an end of our own personal world at some point in the future. What do they say, only two things guaranteed in this life, death and taxes! Thankfully none of us knows when one will happen, but we all know the other happens constantly!

Whether we are in the middle of a war zone or at a music festival just outside Gaza, none of us knows when our last day on earth will be. All we know, is that day will come for each of us. This is the one reality of our future that we can be absolutely certain about. And although we don't want to think about it, death can happen at any time and in any place and today brings that home to us as we listen to stories about young men and women who died for our peace. What today's readings do, is make us ask a very important question 'am I ready to die?' and perhaps prompting the next question 'How can I be ready?'

Jesus uses a well-known image of a wedding to help his listeners understand the importance of being ready when he returns. Jesus describes ten young bridesmaids, who are probably disciples of Jesus, waiting for his coming. We find out that 5 are wise with an adequate supply of oil and 5 are foolish, without enough oil. The bridegroom takes far longer to arrive than they had expected. Was Matthew referring to Jesus' return taking too long? All ten bridesmaids, fall asleep waiting, which is not an issue. The issue is being prepared to respond when the time comes. **R**ight in the middle of the night, the cry goes up:

*Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.*

Our God is a God of surprises, we never know how or when he is going to appear. One writer said 'For some, it is a long-awaited and long-desired announcement; for others, it creates alarm. For those well stocked with the oil of loving service to their brothers and sisters, the cry is one that fills them with joy and anticipation. For those who have squandered the gifts they have been given, the announcement fills them with dread.'

You might have listened to the story and thought that the wise young women were rather selfish, not sharing their oil with the

others, but this story is not about sharing, that's for another story, the point of this story is about being ready. Besides which, how can you share the 'oil' of loving service that you've built over the years? When it comes to being prepared to meet our maker, to meet our lord, that's our responsibility, and ours alone? What we do or don't do for God and his people is up to us, no one else. The foolish young women went off to make up for lost and wasted time, but "those who were ready" went into the wedding hall and "the door was closed behind them.' You see all are invited, but not all get inside. This is not because the bridegroom says no, but because some don't respond to the invitation in time and that is sad. We all know that feeling of being late and not getting in somewhere or not getting the tickets we want or being held up on the M25 only to be too late for boarding and missing the plane. Because once the door is closed, it's closed. Perhaps this image should help us understand that access to Jesus should not be taken for granted.

When the foolish young women do get back with their necessary supplies of oil and find the door shut in their face, and ask it to be open, the reply is probably the most awful words we could imagine God saying to us, '*who are you, I don't know you?*'

The apostle says, we don't want you to be uninformed, about those who have died knowing Jesus, they have the hope of the risen Christ. Is the opposite true? Jesus is pressing the point home, be ready for the party, because it could be too late.

Living with the hope of the risen Lord means living with him in our hearts, means loving him and our fellow human beings, means doing all we can to live those Beatitudes that spoke about last week. And not just because we will get something at the end of it, but because it makes for a far more fulfilled life in the process, if it is devoted to

God and to the service of others. Those that live in a selfish, self centred existence get nothing out of their lives and neither does anyone else.

We remember today those who risked their lives, so that their fellow human beings might live in freedom. We remember today that the uncertainty of life surrounds us all and at times can become overwhelming. We are reminded today that we will all meet death, but it's how we meet it that makes all the difference to our life and our death. If we meet it knowing we will meet an old friend who loves and knows us through and through, who holds out his hand showing us into the most wonderful banquet we've ever seen, then we meet it unafraid, living in the light of hope and with a peace which passes all understanding in our hearts. So today, this Remembrance Sunday, are we ready? Amen