

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

ACNA Readings – Amos 5:18-24; Psalm 70; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Introduction. This weekend in the Church Year is marked in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth Countries as Remembrance Sunday and in the United States as Veterans' Day. Although, in both cases, the official date for the Act of Remembrance is the 11th of November, if this date falls on a weekday many communities and churches hold their celebrations on the weekend closest to this date.

Remembrance/Veterans' Day is intended to give thanks and honour all military personnel who have served their country in all wars and to remember those who serve in the armed forces today. It is normally marked by special church services and parades – in the United States, the American flag is hung at half mast in many locations and in the United Kingdom, a poppy wreath is laid by the King and Heads of State at the Cenotaph Memorial in London.

Common Theme. This week's readings carry a sense of faithfulness and persistence and being prepared for the coming of the Lord. The Gospel reading, especially, reminds us that by not knowing the day or the hour or the Lord's coming we should be in a constant state of vigilance and readiness lest like the foolish bridesmaids¹ in the parable he comes and finds us unprepared. On a day when we remember the faithfulness of others in protecting us, the readings remind us of God's faithfulness to his people and how we can trust in that faithfulness.

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25. This chapter focuses on Joshua summarizing the covenantal relationship the people of Israel have with the Lord God and the nature of the terms of that covenant. Following the Ancient Near Eastern pattern of solemnising a covenant, the people are summoned before the Lord in the same way that peoples of other tribes and nations would be summoned before the Suzerain – the ruler or Lord of a people to whom deference and obligations were due. In keeping with this practice, the Lord God – speaking through his servant Joshua – recounts his actions and deeds that he has done for the people, a summary reminding the people of not just his actions, but that they can put their faith and trust in him in making this covenant.

Verses 14 onwards recount a dialogue between the people and Joshua, where it is made clear to the people that they must now make a choice. No more may they chase after and worship other gods as their forefathers had while in Egypt; now a firm commitment is demanded; the people must now either follow the Lord God and his covenantal obligations, or they may choose to follow foreign gods and forsake the covenant. Joshua shows that he has made his choice at the end of verse 15 where he declares “but I and my household will serve the Lord”, perhaps trying to encourage the people with this statement of faith.

¹ Bridesmaids is used in many translations, though the Greek ‘parthenoi’ actually means “virgins”.

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Three times the people then affirm their commitment to the Lord and his covenant – despite warnings from Joshua that they will bear the consequences if they do not remain faithful after the Lord has shown them such grace.

The passage is prophetic in the sense that the people of Israel will not keep the covenant, and fail numerous times, leading ultimately to their ejection and exile from the land. For us, it is also a reminder that we should not pay lip service to the Lord in our obedience to him as members of his kingdom. Living in the Lord's service requires continued commitment and faith in him, and we should not run after false gods or be tempted to fall into the trap of introducing other foreign practices into our spiritual lives. In keeping with the focus of the gospel reading this week, it is a reminder that we need to be faithful to our promise of service to our King Jesus and that living in obedience to him requires persistence. We should be steadfast in our faith having – like the Israelites – already received his grace, mercy, and forgiveness that we do not deserve.

Psalm 78:1-7. Attributed to Asaph,² this is the second longest Psalm – after Psalm 119 – and the opening verses are essentially an instruction: Remember the Lord's faithfulness and tell your children and the generations to come of that faithfulness. Verses seven and eight emphasize this call to remember the past and to teach it so that we do not make the mistakes of the past, so that as the psalmist says we can have confidence in God. The imperative to obey the commandments is clear and another reminder of this week's theme of faithfulness and steadfastness in keeping the Lord's commands.

Note the specific command to teach the children in verse five. If we want our children to grow up and avoid the pitfalls of life and errors of ourselves and our ancestors, then teaching them the Scriptures from an early age will not only provide a solid foundation for Godly living but also direct their thoughts heavenward from a young age, building a sense of trust and awe that will underpin their entire lives and not just their foundational years.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. The verses tackle the issue of those who have died in the faith of Christ, and perhaps the fact that Paul specifically addresses this issue is an indication of a particular concern that the Thessalonians may well have related to him prior to him writing this letter. Given that the readings this week fall on an occasion when many will be remembering those who have lost their lives in the service of their country – Paul's explanation here is fitting with this theme of remembrance – promising hope for all those who believe in the Lord Jesus.

Paul speaks of a “word from the Lord” in verse 15 in relation to those who are alive at the second coming that they will “not precede those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thess 4:15). An examination of the Scriptures finds no other reference to this if it was a prophecy, and so maybe something Paul either received from the Lord himself or had heard from a fellow believer. Regardless of how he

² Although attributed to Asaph this psalm, as with others bearing his name, could have been composed by Asaph himself who was one of three named Levitical singers mentioned in 2 Chronicles 5:12, or by the first guild of temple musicians bearing the same name.

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received this word, his emphasis is to encourage the Thessalonians that they need to trust in God's faithfulness and to not be concerned for those believers who have died as they will return with Jesus when he returns to the earth.

We should not underestimate the impact that uncertainty about the fate of believers who had died could have on those new to the faith in Thessalonica, and also for believers in our own modern day. In discussions surrounding faith, the topic of the *afterlife* – and our eternal fate after death – is one that is pressing on many people's minds. A lack of trust in what we believe can easily lead to one's faith being derailed due to this uncertainty. Paul's strategy of both reminding the Thessalonian believers of the truth of the resurrection of Jesus – and of the confidence we can have that we will be united with him – is key to laying a foundation of belief grounded in the surety that we can rely on Jesus both here and in the world to come. I would summarise the message of these verses in a simple sentence: We need not fear death as we will stand with the Lord along with all other believers who have died and will be forever with him. Personally, I cannot think of a better hope or promise.

Matthew 25:1-13. In this parable about the bridesmaids³ and their lamps, Jesus begins to talk about the need to be ready for his return and that, in our lives, we should always be ready to meet him. The tradition of bridesmaids bearing lamps for the bridegroom is an ancient one that was common not just in Jesus' day in Israel but in other places and countries in – what we now call – the Middle East.

Wedding feasts could go on all day and night, indeed many weddings were celebrated in the evening, and if it was a big wedding, the feast could go on for days. As weddings often took place at night it was the role of the bridesmaids to light the way of the groom as he went to meet the bride. These *light bearers* for the bride and groom at the ceremony itself would then dance afterwards celebrating the wedding. Sometimes these *lamps* were more like staffs wrapped in cloth and soaked in oil that could then be twirled around providing an entertaining display for the guests and the happy couple. This entertainment was seen as an important task and essential to the celebration of the wedding.

In the ancient world, people did not have wristwatches or clocks on their smartphones, and as travel was sometimes notoriously difficult due to the terrain of the country and poor road network, the question of when exactly the groom would arrive to meet the bridesmaids was often uncertain. People would know the day and maybe that it was early or late evening, but they would often simply have to be prepared for a long wait.

The foolish bridesmaids in our gospel reading have clearly not been prepared for this long wait. They have left things to chance; we might say they have hedged a bet, and that bet has spectacularly backfired. As a result of them not being prepared – of not going that extra mile like the five wise bridesmaids who had kept spare oil – they miss out on the wedding feast and being included in the celebrations.

What does Jesus say about what happens to the foolish bridesmaids?

³ As with footnote 1, the literal translation is not 'Bridesmaids' but 'Virgins'.

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“The door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’ But he answered, ‘Truly, I say to you, I do not know you’” (Matt 25:10b-12).

These foolish bridesmaids will not be included, or welcomed, into the celebrations. They were not prepared and so have not only missed their opportunity but also failed in their duties. For followers of Jesus, no one knows the time of his return – though we know it will come – and we need to be prepared. The NRSV translation of the final verse captures, I think, the strength of Jesus’ point here: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour”. Keep awake, watch, be ready; the message could not be clearer.

In this parable, Jesus is addressing the issue of preparing yourself, or not, for a relationship with God. The preparation of making that decision of whether to let Jesus into your heart or not. A decision that involves not just recognizing and accepting God but also recognizing and repenting for the things we have done wrong. The point Jesus makes is that to be right with God – to have a relationship with him here and now – is not something we should leave to the eleventh hour, and for those of us who have accepted him, we still need to be ready and prepared by living lives of faith and obedience.

A story I heard once from an Army Chaplain – who served in the armed forces across the world for 20 years – has never left me and captures this sense of being prepared. He told me:

Most soldiers are tough and hard; they have a job to do that most wouldn’t want to do or can’t. They live in the knowledge they may not complete their tour of duty. Living in this sort of environment, facing the fear and possibility of death daily, I have to say they are some of the most spiritually open people I have ever met. They don’t have the luxury of thinking about God, Jesus, and death at their leisure. They want answers and they aren’t afraid to ask tough questions. They want – in the event that serving their country comes at the cost of their life – to be prepared. Agnostics, sceptics, and atheists who join up and serve often don’t stay that way for long. The pressing need for many of them to in their words “be straight with the man upstairs” is something very real for them.

Wise words indeed.

So how should we be prepared? There is a danger that we get the balance wrong in the Christian life between knowing that Christ might come back tomorrow and at the same time living as if he may not come back in our lifetime at all. If we always live like Jesus could appear any second, we can end up becoming preoccupied with that single topic and never concentrate on our daily living. Conversely, assuming he won’t return in our lifetime can breed a sense of complacency and make us less concerned with being ready for his return.

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A healthy balance of being prepared and yet living our daily lives for Jesus is one where we are committed to our faith and constantly seeking to move forward in our faith and grow. When exactly Jesus returns is unimportant, but being ready for his return is important and our lives should reflect that we are ready. Ready lives are ones of active service to him and also of service to others, and by following the guidance and teachings of God's Holy Word and remembering the good things he has done.

ACNA Readings

Amos 5:18-24. The expression *Day of the Lord* appears a number of times in the prophetic writings, and the phrase typically was associated with the time when the Lord would intervene directly in the world – saving Israel from its enemies and exercising his great and sovereign power in doing so. There was a sense of a righteous judgement coming upon those who opposed God, one that would be swift and unrelenting. In the context of this chapter, however, the *enemy* is the *House of Israel*, and the prophet Amos is lamenting the fact that they cry out for the *Day of the Lord* without realizing the judgement that comes will be upon them. Verses 19 and 20 make clear that the people do not understand what they are asking for when they cry out for this day, because in the context of the Book of Amos the root of their problems is their own hollow disobedience and wickedness.

Verses 21 through 23 detail the Lord's rejection of their sacrifices, rituals, and even their music. The temptation to use these verses along with others to suggest that the Lord abhors all ritualistic practice should be avoided – especially as the majority of them were mandated and established by him in the Levitical writings. The issue here is the same problem seen throughout scripture; the people have forgotten the goodness of the Lord, placed their trust in other idols and gods,⁴ and think that simple *box-ticking* religious practice – without true intent of heart and lives conformed to his service – achieves righteousness.

The last verse shows the Lord's true desire for “justice to roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” The justice the Lord desires stems from the hearts of the faithful, from those who follow his commands and live transformed lives – raising up the poor, standing up for the oppressed, and loving their neighbours as they love God and themselves. These verses pose a question for us to answer: If, and when, we also on occasion may call for the *Day of the Lord* are we really sure what we are asking for and why? How are our own lives standing up against the Lord's standards and precepts? Similarly, how are our rituals of worship viewed in the Lord's eyes? When we lift up our voices to the Lord, are we similarly also lifting up the lowly we meet in our lives? Is the passion of our worship an echo of the passion for the Lord in our daily lives, or has it become vain, routine, and a box-ticking exercise like those the prophet speaks of?

Psalm 70. The sheer desperation and desire for the swift intervention of God is borne out as the psalm both begins and ends with a cry for the Lord to make haste. This short psalm can be evenly

⁴ The reference to these foreign gods is made in verse 26, Sikkuth and Kiyyun were astral deities, from a cult of worshipping the stars.

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broken into two distinct halves, with the opening verses crying for those oppressing the writer to be frustrated in their wicked intentions by God, and the remaining verses demonstrating a deep trust that God will heed the call, rescuing them from their oppressors. The reference to being poor and needy in verse five is a reminder that often the Lord God is the only advocate the poor have in the Scriptures, and his special love and care for them is seen throughout the Bible. That much of the Levitical laws advocate justice and care for the poor and oppressed emphasizes our need to pay special attention to those in these circumstances who have no one else to represent them. The Church must stand with the oppressed, and uphold the requirement for justice for all peoples regardless of their social status.

About the author. Fr Kevin Cable is the priest of St Peter's Anglican Church in Jaffa, Israel. A Messianic Jew, he was a long-serving police officer in the United Kingdom before training for ordained ministry at Ripon College Cuddesdon, Oxford in 2006. After many years as a parish priest in the United Kingdom, since 2020 he has worked with the Church Mission Society to strengthen the Christian presence in Jaffa, and to rebuild the Anglican Community, most of whom left in 1948. He is married to Jen, a lifelong nurse, and together they share the ministry to people of all faiths and none in Israel.