

The wise and foolish virgins (bridesmaids) - Waiting in Hope

I want to focus today on wisdom and hope. I realise that hope may seem like an Advent theme and I don't think that's coincidental. Advent, which is quintessentially about waiting, is not far off and at the moment we are all waiting – waiting for the end of lockdown, waiting for a vaccine, some are waiting to get married and others are waiting to be confirmed; and all of us are waiting for the chance to see and hug families and friends.

We can wait with impatience and anger – and we have seen that in some of the responses to the wait for the presidential election results in America – but I think today's readings encourage us to wait instead, with wisdom and hope.

Paul's message to the Thessalonians is a message of hope - 'Since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died... Therefore encourage one another with these words.'

The fact of the resurrection is our basis for hope. In spite of the COVID-19 pandemic, in spite of homo sapiens' miserable history of waging wars and our failures to steward our planet, we have hope because the disciples – ordinary men and women – had their lives turned up-side-down by their experience of the resurrection. That experience sent them all over the world to tell anyone who would listen of the promise and hope of eternal life, life lived in in the light of the resurrection.

Today is both the 3rd Sunday before Advent and Remembrance Sunday and we share it with people from all over the world. Some of us are sharing this service live on Sunday morning, some of you are catching up later. I know that in Christ Church there are people who have roots in South Africa, China, Jamaica, Australia, Switzerland, Barbados, Germany, France, Japan, Romania... Thomas, who reads our lesson from time to time, does so from Belgium. I'm sure I have missed out some countries. I would guess that some of our young people feel themselves to be European rather than British and I speak from my own mixed heritage as the granddaughter of my German 'Omi' and Jewish 'Opa.'

And that in itself is a cause for rejoicing, a glimpse of resurrection life – that 75 years after the end of the 1939-45 war we can, as a cosmopolitan church, enjoy each other's backgrounds and culture and respect each other's histories. As we look back to those days from our different perspectives for some of you there will be personal memories of fathers or grandfathers injured or killed in war; for others, family memories of those who fought, nursed or worked in munitions factories or kept families fed on limited rations. Those stories are part of our histories and make up who we are. For younger people 'the war' is just a matter of history learnt in school. And that is as it should be. The immediacy and pain of memories are fading as they must. We will remember the heroes and sacrifices of our countries as we gather in spirit at our war memorial later in this service, but we also welcome the healing of wounds and divisions between nations which time brings.

But as well as looking back, we also need to look forward. During the days of conflict, wisdom and hope were needed: wisdom to discern what truly matters and what can be let go. When things are tough, love, faith, hope, friendship, selflessness, courage are shown to be true and lasting. Wisdom is recognising the things that matter. And hope turns our eyes to look forward as we wait and work for good to triumph, knowing that in the end it must. As a nation we are not very good at waiting. We like timetables and rotas and punctuality. I wonder if that is because we are an island. Bounded by the sea, our national

life is driven by the rhythm of the tides. I always ask brides not to be too late for their own weddings in order not to keep the choir and the bellringers waiting too long.

But that's not an issue in Mediterranean weddings. If you have been to a Mediterranean celebration – and there are no tides in the Mediterranean Sea – you will know that the sense of time is rather more relaxed. The wise bridesmaids in the parable, waiting for the bridegroom to arrive at the wedding feast with his bride, realise it may take some time for the couple to visit all their friends on the journey from the bride's house. That's not a problem. They have looked the future in the face, have prepared, given time, thought and commitment to the wedding and prepared enough oil. The foolish bridesmaids have not taken the celebration seriously. They just turned up. And when they are found to be unprepared and out of oil their response is to demand 'Give us some of your oil.' How we respond to failure is important. There have been gracious speeches conceding defeat in presidential elections in the past. But trying to blame others for our own failure and unpreparedness is ungracious.

If the oil in the lamps is taken to be a metaphor for salvation, then the parable suggests that, in the end, we have to work out our own salvation. Friends, parents, even spouses can't work do it for us. Whom we become, whom are at the moment of judgement will depend on the many apparently insignificant decisions we make every day. They are what determine whether we become wise, hopeful servants with the oil of love, joy, peace and patience, or foolish and unprepared, full of hate anger fear and impatience.

Election results, wealth, professional success, exam results – none of those things are the real measure of 'success'. Rather, we become wise and hopeful, both as individuals and as a nation, if we put time into prayer, reflection, love and acts of service, becoming individuals and a nation, waiting hopefully and wisely to receive the reality of eternal life.