

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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ADVENT 2

8th December 2013

Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 25:1-13

Marriage customs differ in different parts of the world as well as in different points in history. In Poland the congregation throws coins at the newly-wed couple, while in Scotland, if there is a scatter it is done by the groom's party for any children present – we used to haunt village weddings when I was a child. When I am conducting a wedding, it is not usually the bridegroom that tends to be late, but the bride. Although there was the Ardverikie wedding when the couple were staying in Inverness and simply didn't leave enough time for getting all the way to Kinlochlaggan, so that Mhari who runs the house and I were wondering at what point we should conclude they weren't coming and eat the canapés. But usually it is the bride, and I know that at least one set of wedding pictures will have some of the minister standing in a church porch looking at her watch! But usually the bridegroom is also there, wondering when his beloved will come, when it will all get going.

Things were done a bit differently in first century Palestine. There the Bridesmaids job was not to get the bride to the church on time, but to meet the bridegroom and conduct him to where the bride was waiting. I don't suppose that there was any mystery about where he was going, and a tradition which may have begun in other circumstances had become a ceremonial role for the bride's friends. In Jesus' story the groom is late. He wasn't just half an hour late: he was late enough that the bridesmaids had time to get tired, lie down and take a nap. He didn't arrive till midnight. (I always tell the bride not to be late if she can help it, because it is just rude to keep her groom and her guests hanging around waiting: this groom was very rude indeed!) And when he finally showed up half of the girls waiting found that the oil in their lamps had burned down when they were asleep, while the others were able to re-fill their lamps from the flasks of oil they carried. Rightly or wrongly the prudent girls don't share with the others and so by the time they have found a source of oil for their lamps, they find that they are too late to join in the wedding, and the party.

And the point of this story comes at the end, where Jesus, echoing what we read and heard and thought about last week, says “Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

The day nor the hour for what? The beginning of the story tells us – this is one of Jesus' stories about the kingdom of heaven. People had been waiting for the coming of God's kingdom for a long time. They had been waiting so long that many of them had pretty much given up waiting. They were like the girls in the story: they hadn't quite given up waiting for the bridegroom, in that they hadn't actually gone home, they were still in the

place where he expected to find them; but their attitude of expectancy had dwindled so much that they had even managed to fall asleep. So in Jesus' day there were many who could pay lip-service to the idea that God would come and inaugurate his kingdom among his people, but most people weren't actively looking for it to happen any time soon. They had, after all, been waiting for about eight centuries. That would be like people in Scotland waiting for a return of William Wallace or Robert the Bruce. It would be hard to be active in waiting for such a long time, and hard to keep clear just what or who was being waited for.

And yet the vision of Isaiah about God's kingdom is not one which is easily forgotten. He paints a picture of a scion of David coming with wisdom, with understanding – and a people who for most of the eight centuries between these words and Jesus were going to be under the thumb of one oppressive ruler after another, must have craved understanding. He paints a picture of the land ruled with righteousness and justice, so that the poor are lifted up, and those who do wrong are not allowed to prosper. He paints a picture of peace and harmony that extends beyond the political, beyond the human community to take in the wild and the domestic animals, the venomous snakes and the vulnerable toddlers. He paints a picture of this peace and wisdom and rightness being a beacon to the world, so that all that is good spreads outwards in growing circles, like those formed when you throw a stone into a pool. It is a good picture, a beautiful picture, a memorable picture. It is a picture which overturns the expectations and norms of the world, with its insistence on righteousness, with the idea that the weak should be important, that the little child, the epitome of innocence should lead.

That was what people should have been looking out for. That is still what people should be looking out for. It is, after all, a party worth being invited to, and you wouldn't want to be left outside. But waiting is hard work. "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick" says one old proverb, and if you have ever waited and waited for something you may well have proved the truth of these words. It is not easy to keep looking hopefully, it is easy to give up and say that you are going to give up, to forget, to get on with life. It is easy, like the bridesmaids, to sleep. But the Advent message is that we should keep awake.

In Jesus' day people were looking for a decisive event that would herald God's kingdom. They didn't know what it would be, but they assumed that they would recognise it when it happened. But they didn't. Jesus came; Jesus, the bridegroom, the herald of God's kingdom, the one whose coming brought about its inauguration, and whose death and resurrection meant that it was firmly established. Jesus came and no one, not even his closest followers, realised that this was God's kingdom, the kingdom of heaven come to earth. No one realised that in Jesus, God's space and humanity's space had become one and the same thing, so that heaven starts here, and the kingdom is now.

The message of Advent, and the message of the parable comes to us with the same freshness and urgency. We are to keep awake. We are not to let ourselves get lulled into a false sense of continuity with the familiarity of things. This is one of the greatest dangers of our Christmas celebrations. One of the things I learned from a minister mentor when I was in Chicago was to beware of Easter and especially Christmas. People, he would say, think that they know what they are all about and how they should be celebrated. But if you give them just the same as last year they will complain, while if you take a new approach and try to get people to understand more or think deeper, you will be accused of meddling with tradition. The danger of Christmas is that we wrap it up in candle-light, which in modern terms has a romantic glow (although it used to be

simply practical). The danger is that we wrap it up in family, in “It's for the children”, in traditions, and in enjoying what is cosy and familiar we forget to look and see the bridegroom coming, God's kingdom overturning the normalities of the world.

It is good, at this time of the year, as an antidote, and at all times of the year as a discipline and a joy, to look out for those who are poor and weak and oppressed – the very ones who Isaiah said would be lifted up in God's kingdom. It is good for us, and good for the world that we should keep awake and keep a watch on our actions so that we may be a part of the kingdom of heaven. It is good, for instance, to give to charity, to use the HIV advent calendar, to look out for lonely neighbours. These are all signs of God's kingdom and where they are practised the kingdom grows and flourishes.

When we talk of things getting “Christmassy” most often people mean that they are seeing or using decorations, that there is certain music in the air, that there is a cosiness and warm glow about life. And that is lovely. Christmas, which is God coming into the world, is a happy thing, and should be celebrated in security and warmth. But things are also getting Christmassy when people reach out to help asylum-seekers, or refugees whose plight we know of personally or through the news. Things are also getting Christmassy when people lobby their political representatives about issues of justice or mercy. Things are also getting Christmassy when people put themselves out to befriend and be there for the young people in our community, those who are quiet and lonely, and those who hide their insecurity with brashness and aggression. Things are also getting Christmassy when God's people live together in harmony, in such a way that the rest of the world want to know more.

Last week I mentioned that the themes of Christmas are the big themes, and this is one of them: that when God became a man, everything changed, a whole new world was inaugurated, a new way of living was begun. When God became a man, came to earth as one of the descendants of David, the picture which Isaiah paints with words becomes a reality, painted not on canvas – as many artists have tried to show Isaiah's vision – but shown in the life of the world itself. Of course the full picture is not yet worked – we are living in the middle of a work in progress. But the artist, who is also the Creator, has begun, and we may help or hinder his creation.

Jesus tells us to keep awake. We do not know the day or hour when we may find ourselves in the middle of the kingdom of heaven: just as his disciples did not know that when they were in his presence the looked for kingdom of heaven had arrived.

This week I have seen the kingdom of heaven at work where busy young mums have pulled together to help a family organise a flitting in the village. I have seen the kingdom of heaven in the care given to an elderly frail woman by her neighbours. I have seen the Kingdom of heaven at work when Newtonmore village came together to light the Christmas tree. And that's just to name three instances. Where have you seen, where have you been in the middle of the kingdom of heaven?

We are to keep awake. If we do we may see that the kingdom of heaven, although still growing, is very definitely established in the world. If we do we can have the delight of joining in. Amen.