



Attentiveness

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 4.13-end; Matthew 25.1-13

Today's passage about the Ten Bridesmaids is the same passage that was chosen for the sermon I was invited to preach on the evening before Nick Holtam's enthronement at Salisbury Cathedral, or at least I thought it was. I have personally always found the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids a bit difficult! OK five of them *are* a bit negligent not to have got their oil on time but what about the five smug ones – you think they could have shared a bit of their oil in the Spirit of the Gospel? I mean doesn't Jesus also say if someone asks you for your coat give them your shirt as well? So my initial response was to feel an instinctive empathy with the foolish ones. Then the phone rang. It was one of our parishioners, demanding a ticket for the enthronement of Nick Holtam as Bishop of Salisbury the following day, and complaining that she thought it was terrible she should need a ticket anyway to enter into the house of God. "Can you get me one?" she was asking, and I found myself answering as politely as possible "you had your chance, for five weeks we announced it in the parish newsletter and now I am really sorry but it's too late!" "Can't you phone up and get me one now?" she demanded, and I found myself thinking "if it means this much to you why did you not plan it before today?" I thought of my own mother who was so excited, who had been planning her trip to Salisbury for the day for three months. I thought to myself, as I put the phone down, 'there are times when you just have to be prepared.'

So I prepared my sermon about those Bridesmaids for Salisbury Cathedral carefully, in advance, printed off two copies, putting one in my top pocket and one in my suitcase, packed my cassock and surplus specially washed and ironed for the occasion and set off on an early train for Salisbury so that I could arrive in plenty of time. For an occasion like this I felt rather smugly, I needed to be like one of those bridesmaids whose oil is in the lamp ready. I arrived at the cathedral early, that beautiful cathedral that seems as if it has come down from the sky to perch on the grass. I changed into my cassock, and spent time praying before the East end altar and was feeling calm and prepared as the cathedral filled with people. I processed in, sat down next to the canons, with the two scripts, one in my pocket, one in my hands, ready for the moment when I would mount the pulpit to preach. One of the canons processed to the front and began to read the Gospel. As he did so my face must have turned ashen and my heart began to thump so hard I thought it would burst through my chest, because the passage he was reading from the Bible was not the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids at all, but an account of the final judgement. The whole sermon I had so carefully prepared was completely related to a text which was not even being read. I tore through the Bible in the stall in front of me to find the text, and realised instantly I'd read the wrong verse numbers. It was me who had got it wrong. And who was the foolish Bridesmaid now? My eyes fell upon the words "Keep awake for know neither the day nor the hour." I climbed to the pulpit and began. "The passage you heard in the Gospel today is taken from Matthew Chapter 25, but I want to begin by reading you a parable which is at the beginning of the same chapter. It is a parable about being prepared." It is a parable I had learnt the meaning of that day.

This parable is of course about much more than whether we are forward-planners or last minute types. It is about attentiveness, real attentiveness to others, to the things which are most important to us, to the things of God. It is about what we prioritise, so that even if we were to lose hold of everything, we would not lose hold on these things because they are the values which orientate us and are the essence of the meaning of our lives.

There are many examples of attentiveness that come to mind. I think of my brother preparing a room for a guest to come and stay. The clean sheets, the folded towel and hand towel on the end of the bed. Small details, but details which say 'we are ready, you are welcome we have prepared a place for you.' I think of my Melanesian friend as he walks with my mother, never rushing her, never seeming to tire of her stories, carrying her bags, reaching out in an instant when she stumbles to steady her, reminding her where she has put her keys in her handbag for the third time when she fears she has lost them.

Attentiveness: I think of our vergers preparing carefully on a Sunday morning for the Eucharist, a clean ironed linen cloth, the chalices, the books ready and marked up, a place prepared for Christ to come. I think of our stewards welcoming those who arrive on the portico, a smile, a word of welcome, a handshake, 'all are welcome here.' Our prayer is attentiveness to God. Creating space for God to break into the middle of our lives. As T.S. Eliot called it 'The still point of the turning world'. Or as Augustine said "Lord you have made us for yourself but our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

The image of attentiveness that comes strongest to my mind is that of a husband I know at the moment caring for his wife who has been in hospital with a serious illness. He is so completely attentive to her, so aware of every need, every fear, and yet also to every moment of hope, every smile, every kindness shown by the nurse, or skill of the doctor. Each night he leaves me beautiful messages on my answer phone telling me of the day and the grace of his wife, with such love and beauty. I realise that for him *not* to have the oil lamp prepared for her would be inconceivable. He is completely in tune with her and because he is in tune with her he is also in tune with those around her. I go away feeling it is I who have been ministered to by their attentiveness.

Attentiveness. It may seem an incredibly simple virtue but I think in the modern world it is an endangered one. Endangered because so often we are trying to compete on so many levels at once, with so many demands on us, so many desires we feel we have to satisfy, so much busy-ness that restlessness has replaced attentiveness. There is no point to gather and say "this is who I am." Even church itself can easily become too busy.

Where I used to live in the South Pacific they practiced a form of slow cooking which would seem almost inconceivable in the world of fast food. Before a feast the community would prepare a custom oven: a huge fire heaped with heavy stones from the riverbed. The stones were heated, banana leaves were laid upon these hot stones and then the potatoes, the cabbage, the wild pig, the parcels of fish wrapped in leaves, the squeezed coconut cream, then sealed with more leaves and covered with hot stones – the preparation for the feast would go on all through the night and the cooking time was more than sixteen hours. What a waste of time, impossible in a life where time is money. But it is in these shared processes of attentiveness that community is formed. Next week we will celebrate the Patronal Festival and here too at St Martin's we will be preparing food. "I don't know how you have time to do that," someone said to me, "with all the ministry you've got to do." "But that is ministry," I answered. What greater ministry than to create community together?

I think of the pilgrimage to Canterbury from the steps of this church, four days of walking. What for? What is the purpose? The purpose is in the walking, in the being, in the attentiveness to one another. Each year I have watched as feet have been washed, blisters bandaged, food shared, bags carried for others and the barriers which divide us dissolving, no longer the homed or the homeless but human beings all – for a while we learn a deeper humanity.

Next Thursday at this Church at 11.30 in the morning we will remember those people who have died homeless in this past year. We will read out their names; the names we are given at birth which say that each one of us is unique and special and different from anyone else. The reading of their names will be a moment, just a moment of attentiveness for many who actually felt that no one has been

attentive to their struggle and despair. More than 150 names will be read of those who have died in one of the richest cities in the world. Attentiveness can be a matter of life and death.

Perhaps the worst despair is that you are suffering completely in vain because no one sees or hears or cares. We often think that it is the big action, the heroic moment, the ultimate sacrifice, a power of intervention beyond our capabilities that can bring change. So we often turn away and through our passiveness we acquiesce and the injustice continues. But attentiveness begins in the ordinary. It begins in the way you treat the person next to you. The person you speak to at coffee after this service, or pass a biscuit to, the person on the till in the supermarket, the bus driver being hassled as you go home on the bus, the next person you will share food with. For our Gospel parable presents a different truth that all of us have the opportunity to be attentive to the things of God – the things we believe in and the world we want to belong to – and that somehow we must become those whose lights are ready and burning. The Gospel says to us that here today in our midst Christ is present in each one of us. I have come to realise that the greatest actions of love may not be the most dramatic and demonstrative, but the constant ones. Those who go on working for justice each day, persistent, steadfast, never giving up on someone.

Perhaps if we are ready, in the smallest ordinary things, we will be ready too, in the great things. And yes that is where the parable of the Bridesmaids leads; it leads to the parable in which Jesus says that attentiveness is vitally important because if you are blind to others you are blind to Christ. This is the Gospel they did read at Salisbury Cathedral when I thought, because of my inattentiveness, that all was lost. It was an answer to my prayer because it is the exposition of the Ten Bridesmaids and the conclusion of Matthew Chapter 25. These are the words they read in Salisbury Cathedral:

Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom of heaven; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... for truly I tell you that just as you did it for one of the least of these, you did it for me.