

BIBLE READING: Matthew 25:1-13

SERMON (Idea from Anne Gordon)

A little later in the service we shall stand for one minutes in silence and recall those who have fallen in war. Some will remember those whom they have lost, or the dangers they themselves have faced in conflict. Many more will remember the stories told to them by others, or seen in films and on the TV. It is a time for recalling and pondering what has been, the events that have made us the people we are and shaped the world we live in.

To some remembering might seem an odd thing to want to do. For those who have been in wars, there will be things they would rather not recall, and there is always a danger that in remembering we might simply be re-living the past.

It is how and why we remember that matters. There is nothing we can do about the past. We can't change it, or wipe it out. But we can use our remembrance of it to help us shape the future.

There is a book by Vera Brittain called *Testament of Youth*. It was her account of her early life, and in particular of her experiences in the First World War. It is a first hand account of the first world war and its aftermath. Vera Brittain was only in her late teens when war broke out. She volunteered straight away to be a nurse, and spent much of the war nursing the injured of both sides in the field hospitals in France.

It was grueling work, and emotionally devastating too, but that was not the only cost to her. By the end of the war, she had lost almost all of her male friends and relations. One by one they were killed: her fiance, her brother, the friends of her youth.

When the armistice was signed, she was numb, unable really to celebrate. Peace had come too late for her. But as the years passed she began to be faced with new choices: the chance to study, to work - and new love. She writes of her struggle to take hold of those choices. It seemed disloyal to contemplate new life. In her book, she records the moment when she finally turned the corner. This is what she says.

"To look forward, I concluded, and to have courage, the courage of adventure, of challenge, of initiation, as well as the courage of endurance - that was surely part of fidelity. The lover, the brother, the friends whom I had lost, had all in their different ways, possessed this courage, and it would not be utterly wasted if only, through those who were left, it could influence the generation, still to be, and convince them that, so long as the spirit of man remained undefeatable, life was worth having and worth giving." (Vera Brittain "*Testament of Youth*" Virago p. 656)

Life was worth having, and worth giving, that was her conclusion. Her friends' deaths were an affirmation of the value of life. Her remembrance was a way of helping her and her generation build a new future that was better than the past.

All of that is quite obvious I am sure, especially to those of you who have first hand experience of war. But I think it is worth saying anyway. The past and the future need one another, without an intelligent awareness of the past we are doomed to a future that repeats it, but without a vision for the future, a determination to grasp life in both hands - we waste the lives and the sacrifice of those who died to secure it.

And that brings us to today's Gospel reading. At first glance this may seem to have nothing to do with remembrance at all. It's about a wedding not a war. But it is more relevant than you might think.

Weddings in the Bible are always significant moments. Weddings symbolize new life in the Bible, and new beginnings, the birth of an heir, the continuation of the family, the future. When the Bible uses the symbol of the wedding, in parables and in poetry, it is talking about the beginning of God's kingdom, the future world God intends us to build together and enjoy.

A wedding at the time of Jesus was a long drawn out business, involving journeys between the bride's and bridegroom's houses. The many stages of the process were interspersed with a lot of eating and drinking. So there was an enormous amount of to-ing and fro-ing, before, during and after the event. And once everyone has had a drink or three, you can see how the timing of events might start to be a bit approximate.

So, here are these ten bridesmaids, waiting for the groom to show up. But he is late, held up somewhere along the way. Night falls and they go to sleep while they wait. Suddenly, in the middle of the night he arrives. It is at this point that five of the bridesmaids realize that their lamps, their only light, are running out of oil. They ask the other five, who had brought spare oil, to share theirs, but they refuse. If they give theirs away they won't have enough either. Instead of five full lamps with enough oil, there will be ten half-empty lamps which will all go out too soon, plunging the ceremony into darkness.

So the five foolish bridesmaids have to go off in search of a twenty-four hour lamp oil salesman, and when they come back it has all happened without them. They have missed their moment. A bridesmaid is not a bridesmaid if she isn't there to take her part in the ceremony.

What does it all mean, though? As I said, weddings are all about new beginnings. When Jesus talks about weddings he is talking about the new beginning of the kingdom of God. He says it is a time of, "good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed". But he also said that the kingdom might start in ways we might have to work hard to notice. It was like a tiny mustard seed, or a little piece of yeast. You needed sharp eyes to spot the little decisions, the tiny actions which are the beginnings of peace, freedom, release from oppression. Or to put it another way, you need to have a good light if you are going to see them.

The lamps these bridesmaids carry aren't for decoration. They need them to see the bridegroom. They need to be able to recognize and greet him. They need them to light him into the house where the bride waits. Imagine trying to organize a wedding in the pitch dark! Anything could happen.

The first step in building the kingdom of God is making sure we have enough light to be able to see it, however small it is, and however dark the night, enough light to spot those tiny, hopeful shoots of new growth in people or in situations. Without that light we simply trample all over those fragile new beginnings and crush the life out of them.

The light enables us to discern what is going on, to tell whether what we see is good or bad. That kind of discernment isn't magic. It is learned over a lifetime, and habits and attitudes built up gradually - so that when the moment comes they are almost instinctive. A living relationship with God, nurtured through prayer, the reading of the Bible and the company of others who also follow Christ is one of those lessons.

An awareness of ourselves is another factor in being able to see God at work. Often we miss what God is doing because of our own blind spots and prejudices, or we don't see what's happening because to do so would mean confronting things which are painful to us.

The expectation that God is at work in all people and situations, however small and insignificant, matters too, so that we cannot miss God's presence in unexpected places.

These things are the oil with which our lamps are filled. These are the things which help us see the kingdom growing all around us, and carefully tend the new life it brings. Perhaps prayer and Bible study don't seem all that relevant or exciting. Perhaps time for reflection on your own or with others feels like wasted time. But this is the way we build up our stock of oil. We might think, like the foolish bridesmaids that we have enough to get by on, but we don't know what resources we may need one day, any more than Vera Brittain and her generation did. These resources are not things we will be able to borrow from others in a time of trial. You either have your own, or you don't. No one else can give them to you, however much they would like to.

So let's go back to where we started - that question of how and why remembering is so important. Whether we are remembering national and international events, or the personal events of our own private stories, we need a clear light to show us the new life growing from the pain and the problems of the past. And the oil that fuels that light is the relationship we build with God now, the self-knowledge we find now, the lessons we learn now. Today we remember the sacrifices of the past not for the sake of those who have died but for the sake of we who live, and those who will live after us. In the words of Vera Brittain, we look for a future in which life is "worth having and worth giving". That is what we call the kingdom of God, and God's promise is that it is already here if we only had light enough to see it.