

32nd Sunday Year A 2020

Remembrance Sunday in lockdown

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This morning's readings concern the wisdom of staying awake. But our natural scriptural recourse in this new lockdown could easily be the many laments of exile which we find in the Old Testament. By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. O Jerusalem, if I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth. Although we hope our current exile from the sanctuary of the Lord will be shorter than our last, it nevertheless tastes bitter. The Church of England's reaction nationally has been less craven this time, and for that we should be grateful, but it is a small comfort.

Our gospel from Matthew 25, with its familiar story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, presents us with a

stark picture of people excluded from a feast they had expected to share, locked out of the celebrations they had planned. In their case, there is a reason, and that reason is their failure to be wise. It's a slightly strange definition of wisdom. The wise virgins are wise for one reason and one reason only – they have brought more oil than their colleagues. Oil is the beginning of wisdom, the parable might be saying. These virgins are not sage like, not Socratic truth tellers or mystic prophets. The only time we hear them speak, they are refusing to share: there might not be enough for us and for you, you'd better clear off and buy some more. It's hardly an example of loving one's neighbour as oneself. All that makes them wise is their oil, and they're not going to give that up.

As we know from the irritating childhood hymn, it is oil which keeps the lamps burning. And so the oil which the bridesmaids have is not simply oil, it is light. Thus the definition of wisdom is not as strange as we might think: being wise, and having light, are much

the same thing as far as the Bible is concerned. Both enable us to see, and to see clearly, so as to recognise what is going on before our eyes. It's all very well for the voice to cry in the middle of the night that the bridegroom has arrived, but if we are forced to greet him in darkness, how do we know which one of the entourage he actually is, and who it is we should be welcoming? The wise young ladies are those who have light, those who can see the bridegroom. They are the ones who can find their way to the entrance which leads into the wedding feast. Those who come too late find the door locked – they have their light, but it's the light of hindsight, the attempt to jump on the bandwagon, the arrival at the dock after the ship has sailed. Being able to see what is happening when it is happening is the true gift of wisdom.

In our present circumstances, we are largely unable to see. We cannot be sure of what is happening, or what will happen, and are straining our eyes for any signs of hope, any encouragement from that which is in front of

us. But even as we do this, we recognise the fact that we only ever make sense of what we see because there are other things we have already seen. The evidence of our eyes demands a context, and that context is that which has gone before. In other words, to make sense of what lies ahead, we are always also required to look back. Memory, and the act of remembering, is an essential part of being human.

We cannot remind ourselves, we cannot remember, too often that it is an act of remembrance which gives us our Christian identity. Jesus instruction that the disciples are to eat the bread of his body “in memory of me” both affirms and recasts the centrality of memory for his people, the new Israel of God. It tells them that the events of his own life will be for them the new Passover, the decisive act of God in bringing his people from death to life and to the fulfilment of his promise. But it also points their memory forward, as it were, it alerts them to the fact that memory has nothing to teach us unless we are prepared to enact it, unless we

are prepared to make our memories present, to live them out, in the here and the now.

Memory is not an abstract endeavour. Remembrance is always remembrance of something, of someone, an act in which the generality of the past is made particular in this present moment so that it can be recapitulated, celebrated, mourned, but most of all, learned from.

For the church, the body of Christ on earth, it is the eucharist, and the unique presence of Christ into which it draws us, which is the basis for every act of remembrance. Remembrance is not primarily about the past, because it is about bringing into our own lives and hearts and minds the history which has made us who we are. When we act in remembrance of those who gave of themselves and their lives for others, we are remembering not just their actions, but the consequences of those actions, the freedom from personal involvement in conflict which is the reality for so many of us, the continued ministry on behalf of

others which is undertaken by all who offer themselves for service in our own age.

This is only possible if memory retains its links with history. The romantic invention of dewy eyed narratives will never be Christian memory, any more than the creation of “alternative facts” by a certain transatlantic head of state, can change the reality of past or present. Stories are essential, stories support memory just as history does, but stories alone do not constitute remembrance. It is the reality of the past – however uncomfortable, however unromantic - which we are required to make present by our remembering, because only that reality can make memory truly creative, only by building on something real can we learn the real lessons we badly need today.

The Christian act of remembrance which we celebrate this morning is real because it has grown from something historical, something which happened – the last supper and the crucifixion of Christ, both

indubitable historical events. But it is also real because it is something really present, something which is more than a story or an imagination, something which is the ultimate reality of God's self-offering in and with our sacramental worship, something whereby that which is most fully real – the truth of God himself – condescends to make itself present among us. Although we are present to this celebration virtually, kept elsewhere by the locked doors and the impossibility of entering into the feast, the presence which matters transcends the limitations of space and time. The offering of the mass is the offering of us all, but more importantly the offering for us all: God gives himself in love no matter where we are to receive him. No words are more present to us than the words "Do this in remembrance of me".