

Refreshing the imagination of silence.

Remembrance Day 2017

[Matthew 25.1-13](#)

We will stand. And we will remember. But things change. What role do we as Christians have, when that change comes?

There are now few people alive who could say how their lives have been directly impacted by the first world war. There certainly are people around whose lives have been directly affected by the second: perhaps even here today there is someone who never saw their father's face, or who still remembers the trauma of evacuation, but as a nation it is no longer obvious how the experience of WWII affects our daily lives. Next year, 2018, is 100 years on from the end of the great war, and perhaps the nation is beginning to find that Remembrance is becoming a completely different thing from what it has been up to now. Do we think that in 50 years we'll be standing in silence and remembrance as we do today? 20 years? 10 years? Things change.

Does our faith have anything to say to us about such a time of change? It does. Today's gospel story marks exactly such a moment in the life of the Christian church. As you heard that parable, told by Jesus in Jerusalem, you might well have been wondering what on earth was going on... a bunch of bridesmaids waiting for the groom instead of the bride; a groom who can't turn up 'til midnight (where is the bride and can you imagine what she might have to say) and by the way did you know that that Judean oil dealers kept their shops open all night, just like the oil multinational do nowadays? Add to that a fearsome judgement and five bridesmaids firmly shut out of the wedding they'd been invited to perhaps through no fault of their own, and it's all a bit confusing. To cut through some of that confusion, let me tell you that this story was written down around about 50 years after it was told, probably sometime after the year 80 AD. For fifty years the very early church had been remembering and waiting on Jesus' words in Matthew 16: 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.' Those are words he spoke directly to his followers, but in 80 AD it was becoming clear that whatever they meant, did not mean that the second coming would take place within the same generation – a generation which was now dying off. It was becoming clear that the early, urgent acts of Remembrance, the Eucharist, and the oral retelling of Jesus' story, which had almost been a kind of killing time until he returned, were going to have to take different form. Many early Christians simply hadn't thought they were going to be around that long; but it's dawning on them

that Jesus' words must have been more cryptic than they realised. They start to notice and perhaps pay more attention to this parable, and its important message for Christians of that time is that the bridegroom – Jesus – is delayed, and we don't know how long he's delayed for. The wise disciple is the one who is prepared ... the bridesmaids had better stock up for a long wait. But note this: those who wait, are waiting to fulfil a role. They have a job to do. They're going to be bridegrooms. The lamps are needed not just to illuminate the wait, but are also needed *once the bridegroom has arrived* to illuminate and celebrate the feast inside. Five of the bridesmaids are refused because they can't fulfil the active role that is expected of them. This parable leads straight on into the parable of the talents – we'll hear it next week – and that makes it even more clear that we as Jesus' disciples must make the most of the *present* age if we are to be welcomed into the next one. And hopefully you still have Matthew 5 ringing in your ears from last week - 'blessed are the merciful, blessed the peacemakers, the pure in heart, those who endure persecution for righteousness' to remind you what the nature of this waiting is. In all of this the early church – and we too – are being called into responsibility, for looking after things and nurturing them in the name of the bridegroom until he returns. Things change, and its not just about waiting and remembering, the task is shifting to a long term commitment, keeping the light burning through the ages.

Today we stand with the nation, as the nation remembers its dead. To be honest, the nation doesn't know much what to do other than remember. It remembers, then it goes back to Sainsburys. It would be easy for us Christians to be snooty about this. We remember our loss, the self-sacrifice of Jesus, not just once a year but every week, in worship, and hopefully every day, in bible reading and prayer. We remember the myriad ways in which God has entered human life through creation, prophecy, scripture, forgiveness, baptism, the work of the spirit, Christian community tradition and above all in the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ commemorated in Holy Communion every week without fail. It would be easy for us to be snooty because since that moment in 80 AD when the early church realised it had better write these memories down and hold them forever, we have learnt to remember with imagination – imagining how the kingdom of God glimpsed in the person of Jesus on earth could possibly be true in *this* time and *this* place, and as soon as we think we glimpse it, taking a step towards it. We Christians claim that we are changed and transformed by what we remember, and in doing so we believe we are a gift to the world, and not just one country in it.

But let's *not* be snooty: let's be what we're called to be – faithful and trusting and hopeful and loving partners to a world which so often doesn't know what to do or feel or think. For a hundred years the church has stood in silence with those whose loss, grief, confusion, horror and anger has

best been marked by silence. This has been a pastoral act. The church has hopefully not rushed in with answers, but has simply been there. But for how much longer? Things change.

Each year, fewer and fewer British people are directly affected by war, the memory of conscription and of the bombing of this city and others are lost. We might expect Remembrance services and poppy wearing to be on the decline. But it doesn't seem to be. Instead, the symbolism may be shifting. While poppy wearing has always been widespread, it's actually intensifying in weird ways at a time when we are wrestling with our national identity quite seriously. When I grew up you would see poppies on people. Even as a child the symbolism was obvious – that black hole in the centre, the red spreading out from it, a bullet hole. 'It could have been any of us'. But poppies seem to be shifting from quiet testimony and solidarity to something much more determined.

People still wear red poppies, but now you also see them all over shop windows, on cars and lorries, and if you go to Telford as I did this week, you will see a large plastic poppy the size of my face in on – I kid you not - every traffic light in town! What that means, I can't tell you. People do remember, and they should; traffic lights don't. If you go into Sainsburys you will see a massive slogan that links poppies with pride and the linking of poppies and pride is not unusual. Yet Christians remember that pride is one of the seven deadly sins, and even in this day and age we must feel a tiny discomfort at such a claim.

Things change. How can we help a world that hardly knows how things are changing, a world that is scared of change? We are bridesmaids, all of us, holding our lights for the illumination of the world until the return of the Lord: however long it takes.

I haven't written an end to this sermon. That's because it hasn't got an end. The ten bridesmaids – we're in the middle of it. The changing meaning of Remembrance – we're in the middle of it. You and me, and all of us together, we're called to enter this story and take responsibility for part of it and to take it seriously. We're called to be compassionate and loving Christians, different from the world, separate from it, yet caring and loving it and all who are in it. Christians should be grown-ups for the world, and that means engaging and listening and hearing and holding and healing.... Things change. But how they change we can only work out together, anchored by the one steady story of Jesus Christ, and the only thing I can tell you for sure is that the human riches that gather here every week at All Saints church are well up to the task, if you're ready for it. If anyone can 'keep awake', you guys can.