

PENTECOST 23A: 08112020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Joshua 24.1-3a, 14-25; Psalm 78.1-7; 1 Thessalonians 4.9-18; *Matthew 25.1-13*

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.'

Wednesday this week is Remembrance Day, when we remember those whose lives were lost in war - particularly the two great wars of the 20th Century. Today we also pray for members of the Defence Forces of Australia and their Chaplains, and give thanks for their willingness to serve in dangerous places.

Our readings today are an interesting selection, which at first sight look like they have absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with each other, and nothing at all to do with Remembrance Day.

The piece from Joshua is a kind of summary at the end of the book, recalling the journey of the people of Israel as they were led out of Egypt to their new land. Joshua warned the people that if they said they wanted to follow the Lord and be God's people, they needed to be sincere.

He said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord; you choose. Do you want to be God's people, or would you rather go back to following your old gods?" Because the people, who had been living in Egypt for generations, had been drawn to the local religions and had not managed to be very faithful to God. They insisted that they'd do better and promised to serve and obey the one true God.

Psalm 78 encourages us to remember the works of God and to teach them to our children, so that they too will set their hope on God.

So here's a bit of a theme: keep the faith, don't forget, pass on the story and the wisdom.

Then we had a piece of the first letter to the Thessalonians. This also contains encouraging words, about living as good Christian citizens, and some reassurance from Paul about people who had died.

We don't know what questions Paul was answering in this letter, but it seems that people were worried about what would happen to people who were already dead when Jesus returned.

In the earliest days of Christianity, people expected Jesus to return at any moment. As Christian believers died - of old age or illness - people in the churches began to wonder what would happen to them. Would they miss out on going to heaven with Jesus, or would there be some other arrangement for them?

Paul is responding to the grief and fear of those who didn't know what would happen to people who died between the time of Jesus' ascension and his return.

What he says about being caught up in the clouds to meet Jesus is difficult to translate, and has led to all kinds of fanciful ideas about what some call 'The Rapture' - inspiring movies and TV series, and books about being left behind. All of which are fairly nonsensical and not theologically sound.

The message Paul wants to convey is, as one commentator has written, "Persevere in the faith; God in Jesus will triumph. Together, we will be with Christ, which means not only that death will not be the final word, but that neither will evil or injustice or suffering. We will all live together with the arrival of the Lord of heaven and earth."

So basically: let's not get hung up on the mechanics of this, because nobody knows how or when: instead, let's hang on to the hope we are given, which is that we will all be reunited in Christ someday. Our gospel for today tells the whimsical story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. It is difficult to interpret because we don't know very much about the wedding customs of first century Judea, so we don't know why the girls would have been waiting to meet the bridegroom, who was very late, or whether the lamp-oil sellers would have been open in the middle of the night! The point of this story is less about the details and more about keeping awake and alert, prepared for our Lord's return.

As Paul's letter to the Thessalonians shows us, the early Christians needed to adjust to the reality that Jesus did not return as soon as they expected. They had to learn that their mission was to wait expectantly and in the mean-time live faithfully, courageously and hopefully. That is still our mission. When we look at human history and at where we see it heading, we can be tempted to despair. As we remember the horror and futility of wars past, we fear for those engaged in conflicts at present; and we worry about the kind of world our children and grandchildren will inhabit. Freedom, justice and compassion seem fragile in the face of so much oppression, injustice, corruption and violence. Living in hope does not mean ignoring or forgetting the harsh realities of history. It means living in hope and expectation that God's love will continue to appear in our lives in surprising and unexpected ways.

So is there a link between the scriptures we read today from Joshua, Psalm 78, the first letter to the Thessalonians and Matthew's gospel?
And could there possibly be a link between all this and Defence Sunday? I think there is.

Joshua led the people into the Promised Land, a new beginning they had hoped for during years of oppression. He encouraged them to re-commit themselves to serving God and remembering all God had done for them. The Psalm also encourages God's people to remember and to teach children to have hope in God. Paul's letter encourages us to live in hope and expectation, ready for Jesus while continuing to do his work. And the gospel further encourages us to be awake, to be ready for the fulfilment of the kingdom even as we work to bring it to reality in our world.

As remember all those who have suffered and died as a result of war, we still have hope, because we look forward to a great reunion. As we reflect on all those who are still affected by war we have hope, because God's love is still able to break through even in the most desperate of times. And as we pray for defence personnel and chaplains serving today, we pray that they too will be ready to serve God and humanity for as long as they are needed.

We are led closer to the season of Advent, when we look forward to celebrating the birth of Jesus, his continuing presence with us through the Spirit, and his ultimate return.
The Lord be with you.