

## Reflection for Pentecost 23—Remembrance Sunday by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Being prepared is a vital part of many aspects of life. It is only when we are prepared that we can give of our best. That is very true of those who serve in the armed forces: preparation and training are key to the important role they fulfill. If you have ever visited London early in the morning before state events like Trooping the Colour, you may well have seen those involved in the event rehearsing, so that every detail is correct.

Or - something we all have vivid memories of - sitting exams or tests. Try to do them without being prepared and the results will often be failure. It is only having spent hours in study and practice that we can give of our best and achieve what we are capable of.

The idea of being prepared is underlined in today's gospel.

The setting is a wedding which followed Jewish 1st Century custom - a joyful event and one that could be very protracted. It was certainly relaxed in terms of timings. No priest standing at the church door with an anxious concern their face when the bride is five minutes or so late, worrying about the next wedding, which will shortly follow. Rather, the bridegroom would arrive, when ready, at the bride's house, either for a wedding feast there or more likely to take the bride to his own home for the festivities - festivities that could go on for at least a week.

Jesus' parable is focused not on the couple but on the bridesmaids, whose role was to escort the bridegroom into the house whenever he arrived. Once everyone had entered, the door would be shut, with latecomers being turned away.

For the bridesmaids in the parable time is passing slowly, their eyes becoming heavy with sleep - although they know they need to stay awake and be ready and prepared for the groom's arrival.

Then, as news spreads of the groom's imminent arrival, they manage to rouse themselves; but that is when the difference between those who have done their preparations in full and those who have not makes itself clear.

Some of the bridesmaids have brought extra oil for their lamps. Others are running out and need to go and get more, only to return and find the door already shut.

The main thrust of Jesus' parable is to ask the question, are you ready? Have you done all your preparations? If the bridegroom were to come today, if Jesus were to return today - would you be ready for his arrival?

In life there are always many things we should be doing. Often we have to choose to do this now and leave that until later. But how long is later? Tomorrow, next month, next year, maybe not at all?

Faith journey with Christ can be a little like that - amongst life's busyness our prayer, worship and reading of scripture get pushed to one side. Later, we say to ourselves. It is only, like the bridesmaids when the groom arrives, when we look around and discover we are not prepared that we realise that "later" has not happened.

Reflecting on the parable three points stand out.

Firstly, as the story begins, each bridesmaid appears equally ready. The surprise lies in the fact that some of them are not, and only discover that at the last minute, when it is too late and as they return the door is shut, barring entry. It's a clear warning to us all not to put off the issues and questions which we have about faith until it is too late.

Secondly, as the bridesmaid who are running out of oil turn to their fellow bridesmaids, they discover that there are some things that you simply cannot borrow. If those with spare oil had shared theirs with the others, all the girls would have run out too soon.

Again, a warning that there are some things we have to do for ourselves. Return to the exam setting. Because a friend has spent those precious hours in study that will not help you to get through the test. You, too, must do your own study. The same is true of faith, each of us must accept the grace of God for ourselves. God offers his love and grace to each one of us, but we have to say yes or no for ourselves.

Thirdly, there can come a point when it is too late, and the door is shut. It is no good waking up on the morning of an exam and expecting to be able to do all the work. It is too late. At that point the opportunity has gone.

Jesus here is injecting a sense of urgency; we need to decide to follow him and we need to live the Christian life now -

while we have the chance.

And Jesus concludes with these words, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour". Are you ready? Are you prepared?

Today is Remembrance Sunday - a day to look back with thankfulness, remembering those who have served their country down through the years and have done so at great cost to themselves.

As we remember the fallen, we also hold before God in our prayers those who mourn their loss, those who today face danger, those who worry about love ones in areas of tension and conflict around the world and those who lead our service men and women.

One thing that shines through is the skill, courage, and determination of those who serve. It is skill that does not just happen, but comes because of training and preparation - preparation that can be so import in those key moments of action.

Our gospel reading may be about a wedding, but Jesus' point is the same - be prepared for the challenges that come in the Christian life.

If we are to build on the legacy of those who have served down through the years and continue to do so; if we are to build a world that is marked by Kingdom values – one in which love respect, justice and peace abound - we too have to be prepared to play our part, whatever that may be.