**12th November 2017
1 Thessalonians 5.12-28
Matthew 25.1-13

 Keeping Faith Alive**

*Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen*.

I was at my first school and I normally came home by bus. But this particular day my dad said he’d drive over and pick me up. I waited in the playground, first in a large group, then alongside a couple of friends and finally alone.

For what was probably just five minutes, but seemed to me, a seven year old, like five hours, my dad didn’t show up. He’d taken the day off work to do some decorating at home and had lost track of time. When his car finally arrived I ran out of the playground as fast as I could to meet him.

We all get edgy when the expected fails to happen. And there is no disguising the fact that Paul and the Christians of his day seemed to expect the return of Christ in their lifetime. Our first reading this morning, from Thessalonians, is one of those passages that unlocks for us their hopes.

Yet it didn’t happen as they expected and they are left in the playground waiting.

There’s was essentially a ‘short term’ view of the Jesus’ story.

There was his birth and life, death and resurrection, and many believed that in their life time he, Jesus, would return and bring in the Kingdom of God.

It all has the feel of ‘breaking news’ – of almost living through what politicians like to call the ‘first hundred days’ after an election..

It’s the short-term view, one event will quickly follow another.

So Paul is keen to write to the Thessalonians that they should be people who do not grieve without a sense of hope, because, in the words of that gospel hymn, ‘soon and very soon, we are going to see the king’.

We can all drop into a ‘short-term’ mindset when it comes to faith. A certain spiritual impatience can get the better of us.

Sometimes we are impatient with faith itself and want certainties and rock-solid answers. At other times we are frustrated by our prayers seemingly going unanswered. And often we just wish life could be a bit easier with some of our problems disappearing at the click of our fingers.

We live in an ‘instant’ age yet the deeper things in life seem to demand slow cooking rather than a brief spell in the microwave!

And that leads us on to today’s gospel and this parable story that really isn’t a very British wedding.

In this wedding the bridesmaids attend the groom, and its him rather than the bride who keeps the organist waiting!

What’s more there are ten attendant girls. Half seem well prepared whilst the other half basically lose the plot and don’t deserve the trinket and word of thanks when the speeches come around.

There is a delay in today’s parable story and it’s obviously a significant one, so much so that it takes the greeting that these bridesmaids were meant to offer the groom into the midnight hour. They had to wait far longer than some of them anticipated, so much so that their lamps ran out of oil and when the arrival happened they were absent, getting oil at the 24 hour shop around the corner.

There is a delay in this story and it’s the delay of the bridegroom. And there are two responses to this, five girls keep their lamps trimmed and filled with oil, that is, as they wait they also live with the reality that sometime, sooner or later, the bridegroom will arrive. The other girls go off message, they sleep, they become detached from what’s going on. When it didn’t all happen in the short term, they lost interest.

Like all parables you can read this one in a variety of ways and one question, I suggest, it asks us is: how do we cope when it becomes clear that faith is more about the long-term view than instant, short term answers?

How do we cope with the bridegroom’s delay?

Well, one answer is that we keep on moving the e.t.a. – the expected time of arrival.

A few years ago we did a Manse Swap with a minister of a church on the outskirts of Washington and on some Sunday mornings I’d tune into the Bible channel on the kitchen TV as I ate my breakfast. We were there for three consecutive Sundays.
On the first Sunday a preacher, with bible in hand, said Jesus was due to return that coming week.

On the second Sunday he explained why Jesus hadn’t come back and on the third Sunday he gave us a new date!

It’s the way some people read the apocalyptic literature of the bible passages like Daniel and Revelation. They look for dates and predictions.

Well, if you were at our Bible Teaching Day last month with Simon Woodman, one of the ministers from Bloomsbury, you’ll have heard his understanding of the last book of the bible. That it’s written in a mythical, coded style that was very popular at the time – rather like science fiction is today, and that John’s intention in writing Revelation wasn’t at all to predict the end of the world but to encourage Christians living at a time of persecution under Nero to keep the faith and not give up.

Revelation is essentially a book of encouragement and it’s more about staying faithful in our pilgrimage than having the right date in our diary for the second coming of Jesus.

It was in another parable story that Jesus also commends the ‘long view’, the Parable of The Sower.

One of the seeds that didn’t go on to produce a sustainable harvest was the one that showed instant growth. At one point this looked like a wonderful quick yield. Yet the roots hadn’t gone deep enough and when the sun came up the shoot from this seed just withered away.
A warning for us all that faith needs depth with roots that can nurture us when it’s hard going.

For the first five years after ordination I served as Assistant Minister at Fuller Baptist Church in Kettering. This is the town, where in 1792, the Baptist Missionary Society was formed.

Andrew Fuller, its first secretary, wrote in one of his sermons that was still there in the vestry that he knew some folk in church who seemed all fire and enthusiasm one minute, but then turned to ice the next.

All rather like that seed in the story of the sower.

William Carey, the pastor from a village close to Kettering, Moulton, became the first BMS Missionary, sailing to India in 1793 and he liked to call himself ‘God’s Plodder’. He never returned to the UK. He took the long view and India became his home and it was slow going – but he plodded on! It wasn’t until 1800, seven years after his arrival in India that Carey baptised Krishnal Pal, the first Indian member of his church. And what did he do after spending years translating the bible into the local dialect when a fire broke out at Serampore and all the manuscripts were lost – with no backup on a USB stick to hand – he simply got on and started all over again.

So let’s get back to today’s parable and those lamps.

There is a contrast at its very centre between those bridesmaids who tended their lamps and did everything they could to have them full of oil and those who nodded off and, consequently let the lamps run dry.

Oil has important connotations in the Judea/Christian tradition because it’s used in anointing. From monarchs to the infirm, to anoint a person with oil was, and is, a way of saying: God is with you, blessing you, drawing alongside you, empowering you. You have a strength and hope outside of yourself.

It was a sign of God’s presence and in that sense it’s code for the Holy Spirit, the activity of God amongst us.

It was the oil in their lamps that kept the flame burning.

And in that sense this parable, which at one level can be read, in the delay of the bridegroom, as God not showing up might also, ironically, be reminding us that the very thing that keeps us hoping and trusting is the oil in our lamps, the very presence of God that we mistakenly think is absent.

The oil of God’s presence is with us always. There is, in fact, never a ‘no show’ from God. The love of God is in every breath we take, every season we go through, every smile we give and receive. We are held every day in the love of God.

Perhaps, like me, you remember those days when Terry Waite was held hostage for five years between 1987-1991. For the majority of that time he was held in solitary confinement. He was the Archbishop of Canterbury’s special envoy and he told us on his release that every day he prayed the daily office from memory from the Book of Common Prayer – the liturgy that had sustained him since childhood.

Those prayers became the oil in his lamp, sustaining and nourishing him throughout those bleak and lonely days.

Remembrance Sunday reminds us year by year that the world is a complex place and human relationships can go badly wrong.

And the national and international conflicts and injustices that we remember today can also be experienced in their own way in our personal lives as well.

Sometimes we live with unanswered questions, with a longing for reconciliation that never comes, a deep sense of the unfinished.
And at times it is natural to ask: Where is God?

The other Sunday the BBC Radio 4 Morning service came from the Churchill Hospital Cancer Centre in Oxford. The preacher that morning wasn’t a clergy person but a paediatrician, a baby doctor, Professor John Wyatt, he said these moving words:

*Many times I have held a tiny body in my arms and wept with parents at the tragedy of a life snuffed out within hours or days of birth.
I have no easy answers for the painful realities which many of us face in our lives. There is something deeply mysterious, strange and inexplicable about the suffering which we meet, both in our own lives and in those we are called to help.  An anonymous quotation from the hospice movement has been a source of strength and wisdom for me.
“Suffering is not a question which demands an answer, it’s not a problem which demands a solution… It’s a mystery which demands a presence”.*
A mystery which demands a presence – the presence of God who comes alongside us, and the presence of each other as we stand alongside each other at moments of suffering.

On a day such as this we recall what has poetically been described as ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ perhaps we need to take the long view and reaffirm that in all our waiting it is the oil of God’s presence which keeps hope and faith alive.

Towards the end of World War Two, within just months of what might have been his liberation, the Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote these words from his cell at the Flossenberg Concentration Camp in January 1945, he was executed in April that year:

*By gracious powers, so wonderfully sheltered,
And confidently waiting, come what may*

*We know that God is with us night and morning
and never fails to greet us each new day.*

May God give us all the oil of hope, that anointing of his presence which makes the journey of faith possible even in the deepest of struggles. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham 10th November 2017*