**12th November 2023
Joshua 24.1-3a, 14-25
Matthew 25.1-13

 Give me oil in my lamp**

It’s one of Joshua’s greatest soundbites: *As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.* Stirring and inspirational words from a leader soon to stand down, delivered in a holy place.

Joshua had called the leaders and people together at Shechem. For them this was like a service for us at Westminster Abbey. A national shrine at which a long history was remembered and celebrated. And this was Joshua’s farewell sermon, similar in tone to that of Moses’ final words; a heartfelt call from a leader who longed for his hearers to do better.

Shechem was one of those places that prompted nostalgia. It reminded an ancient people of an ancient story – their story and God’s. Once they were Pharoah’s servants, but now they were God’s servants. Once they were foreigners in a strange land, but through exodus and wilderness they had journeyed to a Promised one in which they now felt a sense of belonging, they had moved from outsiders to insiders.

So when Joshua taps into the collective memory, when he retells the stories of how they got here and of God’s faithfulness, he reaffirms his trust in this God.

It's all going well so far. This is a great synod, a wonderfully upbeat convocation and the people respond that they too will follow and trust in God, and it’s at this point that the atmosphere from the platform changes from celebration to challenge.

Because it seems as if Joshua’s memory and view of history is not so positive as theirs. He suggests that, in fact, they didn’t really leave behind their worship of other gods whilst in the wilderness. He suggests that they had been blessed by God without truly giving God their best. He suggests they needed to think differently about their past and their faith.

This is a fascinating criticism by Joshua upon the national collective memory and at its heart is the idea that the people had not always honoured God in the past, even if they thought they had.

On a day such as Remembrance Sunday I’m very conscious of a book I read about World War One in 2014, one hundred years on from its beginning. It’s a book written by Jeremy Paxman Paxman, and he reflects on a family postcard written by one of his ancestors to his great, great grandmother. Her son was serving in the trenches of Flanders and wrote home saying he was confident of victory because God was on our side. Paxman made the chilling observation that many German mothers would have received similar cards from their sons in the trenches saying, of course, that God was on their side.

We all interpret our stories personally and it can feel like a huge assault when someone challenges our take on the past and suggests ours may not be the only interpretation of what was going on.

The other Sunday I was back in Kettering, the Midlands town where I started in church work. A hundred years ago that church had two of the most powerful businessmen in Kettering serving as Deacons: Mr Timpson, who started the shoe company, and Charles Wicksteed who owned the town’s enormous pleasure park, a, Edwardian equivalent of Alton Towers. Now the history books of the church write glowingly that maybe up to a third of the congregation of 800 there every Sunday in those opening years of the 20th century were employees of Messrs Timpson and Wicksteed. Wasn’t it great their workers attended services every week? I even suspect some thought this was God at work, and maybe it was. Yet, looked at objectively a century on perhaps another interpretation is possible? Maybe if you didn’t go to church on a Sunday, you didn’t have a job come Monday.

Discerning what is godly, what is of God and evidence of God’s goodness is never a simple task. Even today the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow has blessed the Russian invasion of Ukraine and those battling on both sides in the Middle East will invoke the name of the divine to validate their cause.

We can only surmise as to what went wrong during those wilderness years. Joshua hints that many were only half-heartedly following God. They had a cunning insurance plan which meant topping up their spirituality by honouring other gods too. Theirs was a hollow discipleship in that, with their mouths they praised Yahweh, yet in their hearts they split their loyalties.

Did these foreign deities offer more security or provide a greater sense of power? We can only guess, but whatever the reason the people were reluctant to leave them behind.

So, it’s crunch time at Shechem. At 110 years of age, for the last time, Joshua pledges his allegiance to God and makes this moment a seminal one for the people, proclaiming that they must do the same. On their behalf Joshua draws up the new covenant of Shechem. This was the time, and this was the moment to throw away the other gods, and trust in Yahweh alone. Joshua showed loyalty himself, he led by example, and he called on them to fully embrace God, to fully worship God and to fully serve God.

Later in today’s service we’ll sing a version of Bonhoeffer’s hymn. This German pastor we remember today as a disciple who lived and died with such loyalty to God. Along with others he helped form The Confessing Church of Germany, a sort of alternative to the Protestant national church which had become highly influenced and shaped by the Nazi Regime.

The Confessing Church made a different sort of covenant with God. One without racial prejudice and one with Jesus Christ and not the Fuhrer as its head.

Along with others Bonhoeffer lost his life because of that loyalty, the cost of his own discipleship was to be hanged at Flossenburg just months before the war ended.

So, turning now to the New testament, how might today’ gospel speak into today’s theme?

The ten girls in the parable have two attitudes. Those who looked after their lamps, trimming the wicks, and filing the flasks with oil. They had made all the right preparations to meet the bridegroom and escort him by night to the bridal chamber. The other half were unprepared so their lamps burnt low, flickered and became extinguished.

A story about being ready and doing all we can to become aware to the presence of the bridegroom, the presence and guidance of God in our lives.

Joshua lived almost a millennium and a half before Jesus, yet 1,400 years before Jesus told this parable Joshua was saying much the same sort of thing to his hearers. His generation were like the girls who hadn’t prepared their lamps. They missed out.

If we blend this parable with the message and ministry of John the Baptist that Jesus seems to endorse, then maybe the oil needed for the lamps stands for our openness and receptivity to God. John baptised those whose hearts had become alive to the possibility of God, the possibility of change and the possibility of love. John’s hearers were beginning to see faith differently. The mechanics and traditions of faith were all around them, yet these rituals and traditions were just frameworks and containers. What really mattered, and it still matters today, is what we put into these containers. With what do we fill our lamps? It’s a vital question. John challenged his hearers, as it were, to pray with their hearts as well as their heads.

One definition of a sacrament is that it’s like out outward symbol of an inward grace. And John was saying, live *sacramentally*, so that everything you do on the outside is motivated by a love for God and neighbour on the inside.

That’s the type of oil the girls needed in order to be prepared to meet the bridegroom. That’s the type of faith the people needed to walk through the wilderness. It always begins on the inside.

As I read both the set passages for today, I’m invited, as we always are, to put myself in those stories. How would I respond to Joshua’s farewell sermon about leaving those false gods behind?

And would I have been in the group with lamps trimmed and at the ready, or would I, indeed do I, belong to the other group filling the framework with the wrong oil, so much so that every day I seem to miss God’s coming.

And perhaps, on a day such as this, I reflect that if I had I been around in the 1940’s in Germany, would I have had the courage to join the Confessing Church?

These questions challenge me to ponder how open I am to the continual revelation that faith can bring. Because Faith is an ongoing process. It can flicker brightly, with the right sort of oil, yet its flame can be extinguished with the wrong sort. If faith is open to God’s nourishing word then it can grow, constantly changing and adapting with strong roots.

I want to bring this little talk to a close with a great lesson I learnt from our friends from the South Bucks Liberal Jewish Community and their openness to God.

You’ll know that they have an annual Passover Meal and there is a service book they use for that. The older versions have a passage from the Torah in which the Israelites sing a song of rejoicing that they made it through the Red Sea, part of their Exodus, yet the pursuing armies of Pharoah were drowned as they raced after them. For them, then, the Red Sea was an open door to freedom, for the Egyptians it was a gateway to death. An early example of God being on my side rather than on yours.

Well, in the current service book the Liberal Jewish congregation uses every spring at Passover, they have changed that part of the liturgy. They no longer think it godly or good to rejoice in the death of other people. So, whilst giving thanks for the exodus of their people, they also now pray a liturgy of sorrow and lament that so many Egyptians lost their lives in the process.

When that was explained to me by their Rabbi, I saw something of the love of God so clearly in that community of faith.

Indeed, the world is much in need of such a way of thinking today.

So, I hope I have their courage sometimes in my own faith journey. To battle with some of my past interpretations of scripture, church culture, personal and corporate ethics, and be open to God’s continual revelation, the humility to realise there is still so much more light to shine from his word. So that like Joshua’s hearers, I too may put down my false gods and pray again and again, each new day that: *As for me, I will serve the Lord.*

May it be so, in the name of the one who has so much more to show us in this pilgrimage of faith.

Amen.

*Ian Green 10th November 2023 Amersham*