

SERMON : 23RD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 2020 *(Matt 25:1-13)*

MAY the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. <Amen>

The great English cleric, John Wesley (1703 - 1791) was asked what he would do if he knew his Lord would return at that time the next day. He said, "I would go to bed and go to sleep; wake up in the morning, and go on with my work, for I would want Him to find me doing what He had appointed."

I have always felt that this is the way we are supposed to live and prepare for the future.

Understanding that that there is a balance in the Christian life between knowing that Christ might come back tomorrow, but at the same time, living as if He may not come back in our lifetime.

If we go off on one extreme or the other, we end up with problems.

For example, in his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote that the Lord's return was near, and so the Christians in Thessalonica should live with that in mind. Apparently, some of them thought that since the Lord's coming was so near, they could quit their jobs, and sit at home fasting and praying and watching the sky for the clouds to be rolled up like a scroll.

When Paul heard about this, he wrote his second letter to the Thessalonians to tell them that although the Lord's return was near and that they needed to live in light of that, they must also live as if His coming was far off.

In essence - Christians must be laying foundations and be fighting the good fight for future generations.

This is one of the great lessons of "The Olivet Discourse", as the biblical passages found in the Synoptic Gospels in Matthew 24 and 25, Mark 13, and Luke 21 are known :

the idea of being alert and ready; holding to a sense of the imminent return of Jesus Christ. He could return tonight or tomorrow. Are you prepared? While we also come to the idea of being prepared for his return, even when it seems a long way off. Are you preparing? <PAUSE>

In today's parable, Jesus tells us of wise and foolish bridesmaids. The difference between them is that the wise had enough oil for their lamps, the foolish did not. The torches they carried were long sticks. One end was wrapped with rags and strips of cloth which had been soaked in oil. It only burns for about 15 minutes. To make the torch burn longer, the strips of cloth need to be repeatedly soaked with oil. That oil would be carried in a little vessel or pitcher and every so often, as the flame began to diminish, they would pour more oil onto the rags into order to keep their flame alight.

Today we learn that five of these bridesmaids forgot to bring any extra oil. They had their torches, but forgot their vessels filled with oil. It is a silly thing to forget, and highly unlikely that anyone would forget to bring something so basic and so essential - but that is why this parable is so memorable. <PAUSE>

I propose to you, that “the oil” represents - for us - something so basic and so essential that no Christian should be without it.

What is “the oil”? “The oil” is PREPARATION. Though all the bridesmaids were prepared ... to one degree or another ... for they all brought torches ...

... some of them prepared better than others and brought not only a torch, but also a vessel filled with spare oil. The wise bridesmaids were prepared because they had enough oil to get them through the night, through the dark time. The foolish bridesmaids were NOT well prepared. <PAUSE>

The foolish lack reserves of spiritual oil. Something no Christian should be without. No Christian can have an excuse for not preparing well enough.

If you and I are not willing to take the time to build up our spiritual reserves while we have the chance, a time may come when a crisis happens in our life - a sickness, a death, a loss of finances or a job, etc - and we will find that we do not have the spiritual reserves to get through.

Christ points us to the fact that faith and spiritual strength come only through regular discipline. They come only through constant reading and studying of the Word. They come only through praying and prayer without ceasing.

They come only through personal preparation.

It is the wise who prepare for the future. <PAUSE>

Two weeks ago, I realised that - because of an injury - it has been three months since I had done any running training. I’ve got my eyes set on a run in Christchurch in June 2021. I need to get back to fitness. I need to prepare. And so I have started preparing - getting up early, getting out and “shuffle-jogging” and I’ll be increasing this “effort of preparation” as the days, weeks and months go by. The strength, stamina and mental fortitude needed ... will be built up over time :) I won’t be able to turn up on the day, turn to somebody on the start line and ask them to lend me some of their strength, stamina, fitness and fortitude :)

So yes, it’s the wise who prepare for the future.

Similarly, if my next ten years are like my last ten years, when I reach 80, I still want to have the strength and stamina that many of you have to continue serving the Lord with all my body, soul, mind and strength.

So, the same must hold true for developing spiritual strength and stamina. Don’t ignore the “effort of preparation”. Whatever you do now, take it up a notch this week. Not a huge notch, for that will wear you out too quickly.

Think about memorising one Scripture verse a week. Pray for five extra minutes. Study scripture five minutes longer. Read the short daily devotion from your website or in a booklet. Find that balance between living with the state of mind that Christ could return at any moment, but also living with the understanding that we must prepare for the future as if He will not come in our lifetime.

Though we are to be watchful and alert at all times, we are also to use the time we have now to prepare ourselves for **whatever the future might hold**. <PAUSE>

Remember Paul? After his conversion, he wanted to get right out and start converting his Jewish brethren. But God had him spend 17 years in preparation before He sent Paul on his first missionary journey. We're thankful for Paul, but we should be even more thankful for those 17 years. If it weren't for those 17 years of preparation, there would be no Paul!

So, if WE are going to prepare ourselves for the future, we must be "working out" now.

Those foolish bridesmaids failed in this, and so when the bridegroom came, they were not around. They had gone to find oil, but it was not something they could obtain on the spur of the moment.

Spiritual reserves of "oil", spiritual reserves of strength, spiritual reserves of hope, spiritual reserves of faith, spiritual reserves of positivity, spiritual reserves of joy ...

ARE ONLY BUILT UP OVER TIME! <Pause>

So let us watch. Let us be ready. Let us get prepared.

Let us make absolutely sure we have the oil we need.

I runga e te Ingoa o te Atua, te Matua, te Tama me te Wairua Tapu.
In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit <AMINE>