

Sermon for 7th August 2022, Year C, Proper 14

Preached at All Saints Biddenden and St Michael Smarden

Luke 12:32-40

Sermon

“Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning... because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him”.

I don't know about you, but this immediately makes my stress levels rise. Who can maintain unrelenting attention on anything for a significant period of time, especially when you don't know how long it'll be? Many times I've read bible passages where we're admonished to pray continually, and despite the efforts of many saints to take this literally and make up short prayers that they repeat continuously under their breath whatever else they might be doing, I've always felt that this couldn't really be what Jesus had in mind, especially when he spends so much time encouraging us not to be afraid, and not to worry about our lives, what we will eat and drink and so on.

Surely, too much unremitting attention is likely to be counterproductive to most activities. Artists and writers, scientists and mathematicians, and especially preachers, all know that breakthroughs most often come in the breaks when we let our concentration lapse. And workers in every industry know that mistakes and accidents happen if concentration is enforced for too long without rest.

So, there is little point me trying to argue that we all just need to work harder to keep our focus on Jesus. This isn't something we can simply force ourselves to do, and even if we try, we'll simply get frustrated, annoyed and disappointed with ourselves. Even worse, if we ever succeeded, we'd mostly likely become proud, self-righteous, and highly judgemental of all those lesser, weaker people

who haven't made nearly enough effort to stay ready and attentive to Jesus like we have.

No, this is all too much like being told to smile when you don't feel like smiling. If you're in the mood, you can't help yourself, you'll be smiling all day without effort. If you're definitely not in the mood, and someone tells you to 'smile it might never happen', well, you can imagine the outcome.

So what Jesus is trying to do is not exhort his friends and followers to greater efforts of endurance, but rather to open our eyes to a different way of seeing the world, a perspective in which we have already been given the kingdom of God, adopted as his beloved children, and provided with everything we could possibly need for a happy, joyful, and flourishing life.

It's like one of those fairy tales where someone has been living a life in a drab, depressing world where everything is in black and white, and then a colourful character arrives who shows them that life is more a matter of perspective, and the very same circumstances can be full of joy or misery, depending on where your treasure is. If your treasure is in heaven, if heaven is your deepest desire, selling your physical possessions and giving to the poor is an easy, joyful choice, that only magnifies your delight in God's love. If your treasure is in your financial security, giving to the poor is a begrudging, difficult dilemma that may make us feel like naughty schoolchildren waiting for a strict teacher to punish us if we don't comply.

And so, Jesus spends most of his time not trying to give us more difficult rules to follow, the long boring manual on how to be good, but rather to shift our perception, to help us to realise that God has already given his kingdom to us, we are already in it and fully belong to it, and the Son of Man's impending arrival is not a threat, but a promise of blessing.

This is the key line in our whole gospel passage. We're admonished to keep watch like servants waiting for our master, and maybe we expect to be punished if we fall asleep or get bored and wander off, but no, there is only a blessing because when the master comes, he doesn't demand to be served but instead fastens his belt, invites the servants to sit and he serves them himself. This is the great twist in Jesus' story, which Jesus uses to try to open our eyes to a different understanding. Instead of seeing ourselves as long-suffering worn-down slaves, clinging on desperately in our own strength, Jesus shows us a vision more like a crowd of eager festivalgoers, camping at the showground entrance, night after night, just to be at the front of the queue when the gates open and the party begins.

Jesus saying, "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit" is like saying "Have your tickets ready and your tents near at hand", because what's coming is an enormous blessing and joy and delight.

Almost always I think Jesus' teaching tries to focus on ways to receive blessing, and to clearly see the blessings we've already received, rather than instruct us in ways to avoid punishment. And this is why it can often feel like there are two very different paths within Christianity: the fear of punishment, and the anticipation of blessing. Almost everything we read in the bible can take us down either one of those paths, but I believe Jesus spends the vast majority of his time encouraging us down the path of blessing.

Both paths will reinforce themselves. The path of fear of punishment leads to constant insecurity, which leads to a resistance to generosity, and a tendency to judge oneself against the successes and failures of others. The path of blessing, of giving away and letting go, leads to less anxiety, less need, more trust, less fear and judgement of others, and, ironically, a degree of security within God's kingdom that money can never provide.

The final question, then, for those of us who may find ourselves on a path of fear and anxiety, for whom the Christian faith has become a series of desperate beliefs and arduous duties to save ourselves from God's anger: how do we learn to see God as the bringer of blessings? How do we become a person who eagerly waits for God with lamps lit because we anticipate blessing, rather than someone who only waits because of fear of punishment?

The first step, I think, is simply to recognise what path we are currently on. If we don't currently yearn for the blessings of the Kingdom of God like the deer pants for the water-brooks, or like the festivalgoer yearns for the beginning of Glastonbury or Greenbelt, then perhaps we might have inadvertently gone off in the other direction, where everything depends on our own efforts, and we're always on the verge of failing, living in world of 'shoulds' and 'oughts' where we'll never be good enough.

But once we see and realise that there is, in fact, another path, where the Lord is waiting for us not as a judge but as a servant carrying baskets of blessings, the greatest miracle is always this: no matter how far we have travelled down the wrong road, no matter how many turnings we have missed, no matter how deep our anxiety and distress have become, the Kingdom of God's blessings is only ever one heartbeat, one prayer, one momentary step away. In truth, it's even closer than that. You are there already.