

SERMON ~ BIBLE READING MATTHEW 25:1-13

In the 2,000 years since Jesus ascended from the earth there have always been Christians who have speculated about when he would return. A lot of that speculation has been spiritually and psychologically destructive. Prophecies pinpointing the exact moment, hour, day and year of his coming again in glory cannot be helpful, or even correct, because Jesus states quite clearly that no one, even including himself, knows the day or the hour of his return: “The Arrival of the Son of man...will fill the skies,” said Jesus, “no one will miss it...But the exact day and hour? No one knows that, not even heaven’s angels, not even the Son. Only the Father knows.”

All we can say with certainty from our guide-book, the Bible, is that Jesus will return, and that he will return when he’s not expected! So our task is to stay alert and be ready for his coming.

But what does being alert and ready mean and look like? The keys to answering this question come from the passage immediately before today’s reading – the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants. In this parable, the faithful servant continues to administer his responsibilities over the household in the master’s absence. The unfaithful servant abuses his position over the household during his master’s absence.

This parable is clearly calling us, God’s servants today, to be faithful and not to neglect or abuse the responsibilities God has given us here on earth while we wait for Jesus’ return. We can, of course, ‘stand by the window and look out for a knock at the door’, but this passive idea of waiting means that we do in fact neglect our responsibilities – we don’t get round to serving Jesus in any useful way, we don’t get round to caring for our fellow-workers. Waiting with alertness is the exact opposite – it is an active response to the situation of expecting Jesus’ return, the situation we find ourselves in. Although today’s reading, the parable of the bridesmaids, doesn’t tell us any more about what active waiting might look like for us today, the rest of Matthew 25 does point out what Jesus will be expecting to find when he returns. The well-known parable of the talents urges us to serve God single-heartedly and sincerely – no matter what size or shape our gifts come in we are called to use them to their full potential in serving God – there’s no room for playing it safe, being cautious – let’s be ready to go out on a limb for him.

The equally well-known parable of the sheep and the goats urges us to serve others – especially the hungry and the thirsty, the cold and the homeless, the ill and the prisoner – all those who are marginalised, all those whose needs cry out to us and to whose needs we dare not turn a deaf ear or a blind eye. These things are the ‘oil of readiness’ alluded to in the parable of the bridesmaids, the things that Jesus will be expecting to find us doing when he returns.

GOING DEEPER

Questions on the Bible passage and sermon for you to think about during the week, either on your own or in a small group:

1. Given that waiting with alertness is to be understood as an active response to the knowledge of Jesus’ return, what then should our activities be? What will Jesus expect to find his faithful servants doing upon his return?
2. What would you say to someone who claims to know when Jesus will return?
3. How can we encourage each other to continue living in the light of Jesus’ return?