

23RD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Revd. Cara Heafey, Associate Minister, Summertown URC



Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

READ: MATTHEW 25:1-13

"Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom..."

REFLECT:

This week's gospel reading is a strange story from Jesus. Strange to us because it's rooted in an unfamiliar cultural context, strange because it's unclear what's being asked of us, and strange because there isn't the happy ending we would wish for; instead the troubling image of 5 young women excluded from the wedding feast, calling at the door to be let in, turned away by the unsympathetic bridegroom.

I can't help wondering what this story about having supplies to last through a longer-than-expected wait could mean for us as we're about to go into a second national lockdown. Is the message here to go out and buy enough toilet roll, hand-sanitiser and dried pasta to last us through the winter? I don't think so... but... what, then?

As with all Jesus' parables there's no one, neat answer; rather many layers of meaning, a story designed to provoke curiosity, questions, response. Even the interpretation offered within the text, "Keep awake therefore" is unsatisfactory and inconsistent; after all both the vindicated "wise" and the disavowed "foolish" bridesmaids fell asleep while they waited.

Perhaps this story tells us something important about being prepared to wait. I've just begun reading a book called *The Grace of Waiting*. It's by Margaret Whipp, who was my predecessor as chaplain to the Churchill Hospital. Hospitals are places where a huge amount of waiting happens. Waiting for appointments, waiting for test results, waiting for news. Waiting for the nurse who said she'd be there in a minute but seems to have disappeared off the face of the planet. Waiting for medication to arrive, or a porter, or hospital transport. Long, bedside vigils waiting for death.

We live in a culture that deplores waiting. Patience is seen as an unfashionable virtue. Margaret Whipp argues gently, beautifully and persuasively for another viewpoint, one where waiting, though painful, can be a grace-filled gift with much to teach us. It forces us to surrender control. It can engender contemplation. It can teach us about resilience, faithfulness and hope.

Perhaps this is wisdom that could help to equip us as we return to lockdown, and as we approach advent, the season of waiting.

CONNECT:

- There's a simple chant from Taize with words based, I think, on the ending of Psalm 27: *Wait for the Lord whose day is near, wait for the Lord, keep watch, take heart.* If you know it, you may like to sing it as part of your devotional time this week, or listen to it online. Allow its repetition to still and centre you, preparing your heart for waiting.
- Light a candle, or even an oil lamp if you have one. Let it be a prayer, a symbol of hope.

PRAY:

- For those who are in hospital
- For all who are anxiously waiting
- For patience
- For hope

RESOURCES:

Our friends at Wheatley URC have a huge archive of online sermons you can listen to, and are regularly posting new resources on their website:

www.wheatleyurc.org.uk

SUPPORT:

Pauline and myself, and your elders, are here for you if you need someone to talk to, have a prayer request, or just fancy a chat! Ping us an email or give us a ring.

