



Advent Course Talks 2009

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Session 1 – Thursday 3rd December

Welcome

Prayer

Father God, we praise you once more for this season of Advent, for its mood of expectation, its message of hope, its call to prepare ourselves, its spirit of confidence and trust.

We praise you for the way you have spoken, in the fulfillment of ancient prophecies, in promises yet to be realized, and in the living presence of Christ made known through his Holy Spirit.

Lord, touch our lives again at this time, as we remember the coming of Jesus, as we anticipate his coming again, and as we strive to serve him better in the here and now.

Grant that through this season we shall be renewed in hope and strengthened in faith, trusting more completely in the future you hold. May our confidence be deepened in your eternal love and purpose, and may we be ready to welcome Christ, in the assurance that as he came, so he shall come again.

In Christ's name we pray.

Amen.

Reading

Matthew 25, verses 1 to 13

Music - 'awake awake o zion'

This is a great song – listen to the words, close your eyes, get comfortable or what ever feels right for you.

Talk

'Be prepared'. A famous motto of the Scout movement, and, I think, an apt summary of the message of this parable from Matthew's Gospel concerning the Second Coming of Our Lord. As we approach once more the season of Advent, a period in which we prepare to celebrate the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ that first Christmas, we are reminded too of the fact that the same Lord Jesus will indeed come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Now when we look at our world today, we see so many things happening which probably make us wonder if the end of the world is indeed nigh - that Christ will indeed return soon. There are endless wars and conflicts taking place all over the world; there's an unusual prevalence of natural disasters of one kind or another - earthquakes, floods, famine, global epidemics like HIV/AIDS and concerns about swine flu; we see the rise of global terrorist networks, and the events of 9/11 and 7/7 brought this into focus very clearly, as well as the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq; and there are fears about the future of the planet itself, about global warming and climate change, and so on. In the midst of all these things, it's natural for us to ask the question, 'are these the signs of the end of the age?'

We can, of course, get rather too engrossed in attempting to speculate as to when precisely the Lord will return. Throughout the centuries different groups and individuals have gained quite a following through speculating about the date of the Lord's return – Seventh-Day Adventists, US sects..... But, of course, Our Lord has himself made it clear that we simply do not know the day or the hour when he will return (v13). We need to simply accept and live with this sense of uncertainty. But at the other extreme, of course, we can all too easily live our lives as though the Lord is *not* going to return. So this parable clearly reminds us that we need to be prepared for Our Lord's return *whenever that might be*.

The parable of the Ten Bridesmaids or Ten Virgins is steeped in Jewish wedding customs. In first century



Palestine, weddings were long, drawn out affairs, and there was no honeymoon - the happy couple would

simply stay at home and welcome visitors. Weddings were a relaxed affair - there was no set time for the bridegroom to come to the house of his bride, in order to either eat the wedding feast there or to take his bride to his own home for the feast. The role of the bridesmaids was to wait and to escort the bridegroom into the bride's house; once the bridegroom had arrived and gone into the house, the door would be shut and there was no possibility for anyone to come in late. (So you get the picture.....)

And so the meaning of the wedding imagery used by Our Lord in this parable is clear. The bridegroom is Jesus himself. He will come again one day at an unspecified time to take his bride (the Church) and celebrate the 'wedding' feast - the heavenly banquet. Note that the bridesmaids are *not* half Christians and half non-believers. Rather, *all* of them are *meant* to be Christians - or at least call themselves such. It's just that half of them *are* prepared for the coming of the bridegroom - of Christ, while the other half are not.

And I think that there are three particular details in this parable which it's important for us not to miss.

Firstly, all of the virgins looked the same - but they were not. Only half of them were actually ready for the bridegroom's arrival. People might come to church on a regular basis and spend much of their time in Christian company, but are they actually in a living relationship with the Lord? Notice that when the foolish bridesmaids bang on the door, wanting to be let into the wedding banquet, the bridegroom states categorically, "I do not know you." It's one thing to call oneself a 'Christian', but the crucial thing is to really live the Christian life - to truly 'walk the talk', as it were - to continue growing in our relationship with the Lord and in Christ-likeness. We need to ensure that we don't allow *our* lamps to go out, as it were:

*Give me oil in my lamp,
Keep me burning;
Give me oil in my lamp,
I pray;
Give me oil in my lamp,
Keep me burning;
Keep me burning till the break of day.*

Secondly, faith and holiness is not something that can be borrowed from others - each one of us needs to possess these for ourselves. The foolish bridesmaids could not borrow oil for their lamps from the wise bridesmaids - they had to purchase it for themselves. And so the Lord is interested in whether we - *each one of us individually* - is trying to live a holy life. We simply cannot, as it were, lean on the faith of others. It's not about whether my great-grandfather was a stalwart of this or that church, or whether I come from a prominent clergy family..... - the point is whether *I* am sincerely seeking to live a life committed to following Christ and to growing in holiness.

And thirdly, the parable teaches us that there comes a point when it is simply too late - too late to say that we will try harder next time. When the bridegroom came and the wise bridesmaids went with him into the wedding banquet, the door was shut and when the foolish bridesmaids eventually came along, they found themselves locked out. *They* went to buy oil for their lamps at the last minute, but unfortunately for them, it was simply too late. What a clear wake-up call this is for us as Christian believers today. We need to make sure that we don't miss the wedding feast - *readiness* for Our Lord's return is the key.

So what does it mean to be prepared? It's about being in a living relationship with a living Lord. It's about living the life that God expects us to live - a life characterised by a constant growth in grace and holiness - 'casting away the works of darkness and putting on the armour of light', as the Apostle Paul puts it. It's about actively witnessing for Christ at work, in our retirement, amongst our friends and neighbours, and so on. And it's about concerning ourselves with the needs of others and attempting to address some of the injustices in the world today - seeking to further God's Kingdom.



In fact, when you think about it, all these things - deepening our spirituality, engaging in evangelism and concerning ourselves with the needs of others - are things which we should be actively pursuing anyway as Christians. But the point is that our expectation of Christ's return at any time actually brings into sharper focus how we live our lives from day to day – in the here and now.

So if we are constantly seeking to live the life that God wants us to, then we will indeed be like the wise bridesmaids who had a sufficient supply of oil for their lamps and so were ready when the bridegroom arrived. The Lord *will* come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, but we know neither the day nor the hour. So - are *we* prepared for his coming?

Discussion Time

- Do you see the return of Our Lord as something to fear or to look forward to with joyous expectation?
- Do you think we are living in the End Times?
- What does it mean for us to be like the wise bridesmaids?
- How do we guard against being/becoming like the foolish bridesmaids?
- What does it mean for us, individually, to live in the light of the expectation of Christ's return?
- If Christ is coming soon, is there any purpose in us working for the establishment of such things as peace and justice in the 'here & now'?

Music - Chorale Prelude: 'Wachet Auf' (JS Bach)

Closing Prayer and the Grace

O Lord our God,
make us watchful and keep us faithful
as we await the coming of your Son our Lord;
that, when he shall appear,
he may not find us sleeping in sin
but active in his service
and joyful in his praise;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.