

**REFLECTION “The old, old story”
St Ronan’s Church 12 November 2017**

Norman Wilkins

This passage in Matthew about these ten virgins has been the inspiration for a whole lot of sermons, almost as many as it has inspired ribald comments. But I don’t have a good memory for that sort of stuff, so this will be a bit more appropriate for the environment.

So back in the time that Matthew wrote this it did actually make sense?

Consulting Mr. Google: Jewish custom apparently required the bridesmaids to wait at the bridegroom's house, to receive him and the bride, and as this was commonly after sunset, they were provided with lamps or torches. So young women doing what they did seems to be the way things were.

Ten has some significance as it is one of the numbers of perfection. Apparently there were usually ten lamps in a bridal procession.

So that makes the whole scene plausible.

The next thing is why do I think Matthew put this in his Gospel?

Whether Jesus actually originally told the story I don’t know. The Jesus Seminar think it was unlikely, but really I don’t think that matters. Regardless of whether Jesus said it or not, Matthew would need a reason to put it in. What matters is to get an idea of how those who were hearing Matthew’s Gospel would take it. What was the point that Matthew was trying to make?

It is generally thought that Matthew wrote his Gospel about 85ad, give or take a decade. At that time those who accepted that Jesus had been the Messiah were predominantly Jews. The Jewish world only a generation or so from the start of the Church, was a very disrupted society to put it mildly.

About 20 years previously the militant hot-heads in Palestine had risen up in a very determined revolt against the Romans who had ruled their land for a century or so. There was complete rebellion in 66CE and the Roman Titus crushed the rebellion destroying Jerusalem in 70CE and finally Masada in 73CE. Hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed or sent into slavery.

The first Christians were Jews so presumably they suffered the same fate as the other Jews.

My guess is that it would have been as miserable a time as it is for modern Syrians.

Matthew uses the story to say “keep your spirits up, keep faithful, for Jesus will return and will take you under his care.

However, I would say the expected return of Jesus, the bridegroom did not happen, instead things did not settle, for in 132CE there was another revolt under a man called Bar Kokkba with the result that Jerusalem was “ploughed up with a yoke of oxen”; the Roman expression for complete devastation.

So during the lifetimes of the people for whom Matthew wrote his gospel the situation in Israel anyway would have been pretty awful, and I reckon it would have been hard to continue to believe in Good News. So it has been over and over again during the life of the Church, since Christians were first told to keep their faith alive like those five wise virgins kept awake, and were prepared to be in it for the long haul with extra oil so they kept their lamps alight.

The message was one of hope, Jesus would return and they would be taken into His heavenly kingdom with him - providing the lamps of their faith were still burning brightly.

The obvious question is “Heh, where’s this bridegroom then? It sounds like a big have”

Looking back through the almost 2000 years of history what happened was beyond anyone’s imagining. The Christian message spread throughout and beyond the Roman Empire. There were times of persecution and times when it was comfortable.

The history of the church can be seen as a series of reforming movements restoring what was believed to be the way of Jesus to a corrupt church, and then they in their turn became corrupted by power, privilege and the easy life. Then the process was repeated by new men and women who attempted to get things back on track. Their work lasted for a while before the corrupting power took over again.

There were men like St. Francis, Dominic, John Waldo. Some succeeded at the time, some suffered rejection and death. There was the darkness of the inquisition and burning of supposed witches, but somehow we humans never gave up hope.

There were Martin Luther and other reformers of course.

Out of the Church of England came the Methodists. There was the Salvation Army, both devoted to reaching the people with the love of God that the more established representatives of the Gospel could not.

Over and over again people with a sense of right and a determination to see it prevail, often with great suffering kept the light going. Generation after generation there were those who followed in the tradition of those five mythical wise virgins and kept the light, who never gave up hope. People saw the darkness and often gave their lives to bring life, and their hope wasn't unjustified even if at the time the cause seemed lost.

Over and over again there have been people and movements that have kept the flame of hope burning. Here and now, we in St. Ronan's are part of a movement that stands for a faith that makes sense in the twenty first century. We are part of that 2000 year journey of reform as we work to keep the way that we believe Jesus stood for. It is our turn to keep the light burning and provide that haven for Christianity and society in our generation and this place.

Actually it is a far longer journey than the 2000 years of Christian history. Going back to the origins of our faith; Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt but they had 40 years in the wilderness before reaching the Promised Land. When they got into the Promised Land they had to endure pretty chaotic times for a couple of hundred years before King David brought order.

Even that is not the whole story; actually it is just a very small part of the story. The way of Jesus lives on with every bit as much life as it has ever done, maybe more. We are only one flame amongst a fairy lights display as the message has spread far and wide beyond the Church.

In our daily lives as we interact with all manner of people, from neighbours, bus drivers, shop workers, politicians, members of secular groups, we find the practical love that Jesus espoused and was there before him in the Hebrew Prophets and is there in other religions. It is there before us and around us. We can think the light is going out, but the light is all around us in the attitudes and actions of a huge number of people.

The story of humanity is not just Christian church history that I have skated over, but actually the dominant theme of our stories and movies. Faced with a threat, struggling against all odds when things seemed impossible, hope doesn't die and good triumphs. The Harry Potter books, the Hobbit, Lord of the Rings, Dr. Who, Broadchurch, Poldark (which indicates I am not into profound stuff). It's hard to remember a book or a movie that doesn't have adversity being overcome through human determination. Fulfilled hope is fundamental to us being human and it is fundamental to the following of Jesus. Faith, hope and love. Secular expressions: "God helps those who help themselves". "Say your prayers but keep your powder dry" are just two that have the same message really as this bit about 10 virgins in Matthew's Gospel. It is the message of most of our literature and movies.

It is Living Wage week this week and that is a story that is part of this parish's life. Some in our society are suffering from the poverty caused by not being paid enough to live on. They and others like us give our time and energy to overcome this scourge, and we always hope and actually have a lot of success. This story is the story of those on the periphery. The new life, the hope, the regeneration is always on the periphery. People of vision are initially marginal, then it becomes mainstream and eventually it can become like the dead wood at the core maybe going rotten. It is like the life cycle of a tree.

So maybe what Matthew said wasn't a big have, false advertising after all. The coming of the bridegroom has happened over and over again in big ways and in those small personal ways to renew, refresh, empower, reignite the light, the way of Love that Jesus stands for. It's the Christian story; it's the human story.

I started talking about the hope for Jesus to come and rescue those early Christians from the terrible, Syria like situation that was their reality. They could never have imagined the future.

Keeping awake, keeping the lamp of faith, hope and love alight has never been easy and never will be. So what is today's equivalent of that long wait faithfully for the bridegroom in the cold and the dark when those virgins could only hope that he would actually come?

They are the big issues on the world stage. The big issues of today have actually taken on the new dimension of universality. Up to now religious persecution, religious decay, even the horrors of the trenches in WW1 have left much of the world untouched. In my skate over the surface of history, it was so terribly narrow. No mention of what we know of pre-colonised New Zealand, no mention of China's rich history, India, the Middle East, Africa. What I talked about was the narrow view of an Englishman. All I mentioned was completely irrelevant outside that Anglo centric history.

But nuclear weapons represented a change, if that threat became reality then it is probable that all life on Earth would be affected. The threats that we strive against and live in hope that rescue will come are now threats against all humans and maybe even all life on Earth
What we face now as humanity could blow that tree I likened us to right over.

I suggest that there are at least four threats to humanity and the whole natural world that I can see. They don't just threaten the church, or a small part of the human world. They are far more universal.

I won't say much more about those four new threats that will take human determination, human smartness, self-sacrifice and bravery to combat. But I believe because we are true to our tradition we will stay awake, we will strive, and we will keep the lights of hope alive. Good can come out of human faithfulness and once again that will be the reality of the coming of the bridegroom.

First. The threat of warfare, people displaced from their homes on a huge scale by warfare and things like climate change, and what that will mean for the rest of us. We cannot expect to live in our little isolated and relatively insulated paradise when huge numbers of people in much of the world are displaced from their homes and have to find somewhere to live.

Second. The threat from logic, science and truth being swamped by ignorance and fundamentalism. This seems to have been the great corrupter of the world's faiths so that they become toxic to humanity rather than strengthen us and guide us so we can understand and accept each other and use our science to empower us to overcome whatever could destroy us.

Third. The threat of all life and our civilization failing because of the effects of climate change. That's a longer term and huge one. That is the really huge threat.

Finally a nebulous seeming threat to us humans. Could artificial intelligence develop and come to replace humanity?

There are others of course that we can think of, disease because of super-bugs for example. But we don't need them to be spelt out, just to remember that as in the past they will only be overcome by the wise virgins of today who strive and who always hope, who never give up.

I have tried to say a bit about them in a sort of hymn I have composed. But like those early Christians who had no idea of what lay ahead, and neither can we; but as always our hope must never die.

HYMN "Tell me the old old story" (rewritten by Norman Wilkins)

**1. Tell us the old old story
That hope will never die
That good will be our future
As we strive to reach the sky
Tell us that story simply
So we can pass it on
We all will share one future
All people under one Sun
Tell us the old old story, (X3)
*So hope shall never die***

**2. Tell us the story often,
For we have need of more
Knowing of those who suffer
From hunger and from war,
Tell us the story often
For life for us is safe
But hope is what is needed
For widow, maimed and waife
Tell us the old old story, (X3)
*So hope shall never die***

**3. Tell us the story clearly
We need to see the truth
Amongst the strident voices
Denying logic and proof
Let us value our science
For it's God's way to go
There is no good in lying
To lies our faith says "No!"
Tell us the old old story, (X3)
*So hope shall never die***

**4. Tell us the story gently
Like the whisper of a breeze
The energy of sunlight
a balanced Earth at ease
tell us the story gently
so hope can fill our soul
to save all life on Earth
our climate calm and cool
Tell us the old old story, (X3)
*So hope shall never die***

**5. Tell us the story Siri
The future we may glimpse
When all may be computers
Artificial intelligence
Tell us the robot story
And give us hope that we
May have God's real wisdom
So humans can stay free
Tell us the old old story, (X3)
*So hope shall never die***

A final comment, this isn't just the human story, it is the story of all life. It is the story of evolution. Nature changes, species are put under stress, some come through it because they are more suited to the change and then they prosper in a changed nature. The old old story is as old as life itself as I have tried to illustrate with these two pictures.

