

# Remembrance Sunday – Third Sunday before Advent 2020

The month of November always starts with a celebration remembering the saints, followed by All Souls, from which we move to Remembrance Sunday. One might say that remembrance is powerfully in the air at this time of year.

When the Church of England started to reform the church year, it followed Methodist and Presbyterian practice in inserting a new theme between the end of Trinity and start of Advent – the Kingdom Season, ‘observed as a time of celebration and reflection on the reign of Christ in earth and heaven.’ Until now, I have been rather lukewarm (along with a great many other Anglicans) about this, although more positive to it than the Roman Calendar’s unutterably dreary Sundays of ‘Ordinary Time.’ Who thought that one up?

However, I now find myself thinking that this period between All Saints’ Day and Advent does give us something fresh to explore as it leads towards the start of a new church year. Don’t be put off by the rather fulsome language about celebrating and reflecting on the reign of Christ in earth and heaven. It may more helpfully be regarded as a season of reflection on our own discipleship together with a healthy opportunity to explore spiritual growth as we seek to follow Jesus Christ – the one whose kingship on earth is revealed in poured-out love upon the cross. Perhaps we should think of these weeks as ‘Lent in ordinary.’

Two thousand years of Christianity have bequeathed us a wealth of remembrances: seasons, holydays and festivals which punctuate the year – markers on the road of faith. All this reminds us that remembrance punctuates every aspect of our lives. Remembering something or someone brings us close and makes whatever or whoever it is present within our lives. We are enabled to relate to it – it becomes ‘something in the air.’ Doing this draws us into a unity which is something beyond ourselves but very real. As well as remembering, our faith should also bear a strong sense of expectation.

In his First Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul inspires us through vivid imagery to confront the face of death. Perhaps the first surviving Christian document to have been written and predating the Gospels, it gives us an insight into the concerns of everyday living in relation to Christian Faith. Members of this growing community of faith are worried because their brothers and sisters in Christ are dying before the Second Coming of the Lord – a fervent hope of the early Christians. Yet the Thessalonians’ worries over death are swept away by Paul in the most extravagant and evocative language, who himself must have had to explore what the Second Coming meant to him: *‘We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.’* *‘The Lord himself will come down from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with those in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.’* It is just the most evocative and wondrous language, isn’t it.

At its core is the remembrance of the unity we share with our brothers and sisters in Christ – living and departed – as purveyors of the Gospel Message, together with the need to live lives of expectation - of our being caught up in the wonder of God’s love through Jesus Christ. Paul’s life reached its full potential through knowledge of the self-giving love Jesus bore for him, and captures in this passage the relevance of our allowing the same transformative presence of Jesus into our lives as we, too live in expectation.

The Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins in our Gospel illustrates the same: expectation and preparedness. We can only achieve our Gospel calling if we are ready at all times to allow God to shape our onward journey, rather than wait in unpreparedness. God gives us every tool we need to travel onwards, but this is a two-way relationship. We should always seek to have our lamps of faith fully stocked with the oil of joy and gladness, longing to hear the bridegroom's voice when *'we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever.'*

How do we do this? Ours is a lifelong journey to open our eyes to the grace of God within humanity and creation; seeking to follow Jesus Christ in love; and allowing the inward working of the Holy Spirit. Inevitably, this requires effort, it is not just something that happens, because our response can only be made through engagement. The wise bridesmaids were prepared – they were already to heed the voice of the bridegroom. The foolish ones had all the necessities but didn't responding to the situation until it was too late.

I referred to St Augustine last week, when I quoted his phrase, 'one loving heart sets others on fire' - a call about discipleship and the wonderful things we can achieve in touching others' lives. But what about OUR response to God's call within our lives? This was something Augustine wrestled with during his faith journey as he became more and more aware of God's grace revealed in the face of Jesus Christ; as he allowed the Holy Spirit free reign within his life. He allowed his lamp to be filled with God's oil of love, and said this:

*Only lately have I loved you, O Beauty so ancient and so new. For you were within and I was without, and I only looked for you out there. Unlovely, I rushed heedlessly among the things you created without knowing you. You were with me, but I was not with you. These things kept me far from you; even though they only existed because of you.*

*You called and cried aloud and forced open my deafness. You gleamed and shone within my life and chased away my blindness. You breathed out fragrant love and I drew my breath; and now I desire to grow in love for you. I tasted, and now I hunger and thirst for your grace. You touched me, and I burn for your peace.*

*(Book 10, chapter 27 adapted)*

Augustine found peace, true peace, in God. On this Remembrance Sunday, as we give thanks for those who sacrificed themselves for the causes of justice and freedom, may we, like them, continue to lead others to the knowledge of God's love and the assurance of perfect peace and freedom found in him alone. They, through their sacrifice, in the words of Amos, allowed 'justice to roll on like a river, and righteousness like a never-ending stream.'

They shape our histories and are part of our remembrances, but for them and for us the love of Jesus is past, present and future. For all our histories, it is the love that never fails, because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. (*Hebrews 13: 8*)



*The Wise and Foolish Virgins – Frederic Leighton (1830-96) St Michael's Church, Lyndhurst*

### **Amos 5: 18-24**

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light; as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear; or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake. Is not the day of the Lord darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

### **I Thessalonians 4: 13-end**

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

### **Matthew 25: 1-13**

'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him." Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out." But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves." And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut. Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us." But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you." Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.