

“Dealing with delay” a sermon based on Matthew 25:1-13 preached at the evening service at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 12 November 2017.

It seems the early followers of Jesus imagined he would return soon after his death and resurrection. As time stretched on, the New Testament letters show how the early church adapted its views to a longer time line.

The concept of Jesus’ return, or his second coming, has been variously interpreted.

There are those who speak of a cataclysmic and transforming return some time in the future. Sometimes people predict a date. I often have people point to the signs that Jesus is about to return - wars and rumours of wars the Bible says. We are in the end times, they say.

That understanding becomes more pronounced in apocalyptic times. It emerges in periods of uncertainty, disaster and war. Climate scientists often use apocalyptic language. Political scientists when referring to North Korea often use apocalyptic language. I was at a Presbytery meeting recently where a civil defence official warned us about the risks of the Alpine Fault fracturing, and used apocalyptic language.

When people have a sense of impending apocalypse, talk of Jesus’ return seems to emerge more strikingly.

There are others who put emphasis on how Jesus comes now. Rather than one cataclysmic transforming return, they suggest that Jesus comes many times. They interpret the Bible’s references to returning as describing how we experience him coming to us day by day, here and now.

Now let me describe my approach.

I believe that Jesus upholds a vision of a completed creation, a reconciled people, a harmonious earth. Jesus embodies that vision in his own being and teaching. In his coming among us he decisively disclosed that vision, he embodied it, and he embodied it so faithfully, even to the point of death, that it shifted the dynamics of power in the world. He was so faithful that in him God ultimately disarmed what destroys. He set in play, in the midst of our

world, an alternative power, an alternative narrative, an alternative identity, to counter and conquer what kills. It is the power of life against the power of death. It is resurrection when the empire claims ultimate and final power. It is the power that raises people to life in fullness against all that drags them down. It was so decisive, so transformative, that it had significance beyond the postage stamp of Palestine.

That power is at work in every church, in every community, in every location, to varying degrees, according to how people align with it. I do not restrict that alignment to those who take the name of Jesus. There are many people who are part of what God is doing in the world even though they do not know it.

And in some way, I cannot know, I believe that ultimately that power will finally pervade people, locations, nations, the world. That is the stretch in faith for me – to believe that. It is less of a stretch because I have seen that power at work, incipiently, in the most god-forsaken parts of the world. In a village in a rubbish dump in Manila; in a small church in Angeles, a city near Manila where young women trafficked from villages of poverty are sexually abused; in a group of women in South Sudan.

I am more inclined to believe in the culmination and completion of things in Jesus Christ because of where I have seen that power at work, in unlikely and seemingly hopeless places. This concept of the culmination and completion of the life of Jesus Christ is an aspect of my belief in the power of his influence.

And even if I am wrong about the detail and the theory, I refuse to give up on the vision Jesus upholds. I believe it despite all the evidence to the contrary. I refuse to give in to hopelessness and cynicism and defeat and lesser gods, to lesser powers. They are not worth my life.

I choose to hope, I choose to believe, I choose to give my life to that vision. I have not seen anything worth replacing it.

So the idea of the coming bridegroom in the story is fundamental to me, in the sense that it speaks of an encompassing vision and reality and power for good, for life, for resurrection, for God, for the reign of God, and of being prepared for it, with all my strength.

We are called to be part of it, to live into it, to uphold and proclaim it, to invite others to join it, to celebrate it and to point to it.

One of our challenges is that we live in an age of the instant where people expect things done now, although now differs according to culture and location.

Without wanting to encourage unhelpful delays, I want to speak about where delay might be helpful, when it is important to stay prepared for the right time, rather than using all our oil at once.

I have worked with people who when they see a problem want to solve it as soon as possible. They ask what is the problem imagining that it is easily named and quickly solved. They see a straight line between the problem and the solution.

I have also learned that sometimes the quick solution is part of the problem. Sometimes the least helpful people are those determined to solve a problem directly and quickly.

Sometimes quick solutions stop the organisation from changing and considering other options. If an organisation always moves quickly from problem to solution, it may never ask what the real problem is. It may never attend to the deeper dynamics. It may just perpetuate being trapped. So the organisation only ever addresses symptoms and never causes.

Sometimes, and this is especially so in the church, one needs to sit with a problem for a while in order to understand its dynamics, for it is the underlying dynamic that needs addressing. One needs to ask what the problem is asking us. One needs to ask what God is trying to tell us in the problem.

Let me give an example.

People become worried by declining participation in the church. They imagine the answer is to adopt this practice or that practice. There are no simple answers to this question. Perhaps the only answer is to live with the question and to let the answer emerge – what is God trying to tell us? Where is God in this problem? And the answer emerges in submitting the issue and the situation and the problem to God. That is the answer, and somehow as people

give themselves to the question, to praying through the question, options are considered beyond people's imaginations.

That is what it means to be prepared, to have oil in our lamps that sees us through the night, to be ready for the coming of the bridegroom.

Having enough oil to wait, to attend, to stay ready, putting aside the impulsive, the reactive, the demanding now.



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