

“Get ready to wait” a sermon based on Matthew 25:1-12 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 8 November 2020.

When I chose the topic of this sermon I had not realised how relevant it was going to be to the Presidential election - with people waiting for the results! I imagine that as people involved in management heard the gospel this morning, they thought – where was their risk management plan! This parable is almost a proof text for such plans, or is it? The last words call us to keep awake, but given that both the wise and foolish bridesmaids fall asleep, perhaps this is a parable about being ready.

Let me begin with an analogy. The Mainland Cheese tv ad - two old men wearing braces and crumpled hats, sitting at a wooden table in front of an old stone building. They speak slowly because time goes slowly and cheese matures slowly. They wait and wait and wait. Every now and then, they taste the cheese but it is not yet ready. They wait a bit longer. Hidden away, beyond sight, the cheese is maturing. Their message - “Good things take time”. They are trusting a process that has been set in play but is hidden from them, and they are waiting for the time of maturity. In the meantime, in their reliance and trust of the process of maturing, they are ready. Good things take time. The wise ones in the parable were ready enough, trusting enough, to be able to sleep.

The foolish ones expect things to happen in their short timeline, according to their expectations, and they weren't ready to wait. I have seen that. An agency wanted to put up a building in a neighbouring country. Dozens of people came from a country like New Zealand, planned in advance, sent over the timber and tools in containers, spent weeks putting up the building and left. But they didn't realise how hungry the local termites were. They used timber that did not withstand termites. And they didn't realise the building needed to face in a particular direction in order not to be ransacked by local gangs. Within a couple of years, the building collapsed. By contrast, around the same time, another building was put up by people from the same country but who took time to listen to locals. As a result they used different material and a different style, and it still stands. One group waited long enough to listen to local people, so when the time came, they were ready.

Waiting is for anticipating and then getting ready for the right moment. That kind of waiting is especially needed when there are different cultures and different generations that need to be consulted and included, so that everyone becomes ready for the right time, with a spirit of joyful anticipation.

A congregation had not had children in worship for many years. The elders decided they wanted to include children. So they began to adapt their worship space. They looked at their approach to worship. They wondered about where children could participate and contribute. They prepared the congregation for movement and noise. It took four years from the time they made their initial decision before the first young families began to participate. But they when they turned up, the congregation was ready. A congregation that was ready enough to wait.

Getting ready in a congregation requires sustaining the basic disciplines of spirit needed for moments of challenge and opportunity. In the 1980s I was visited by a previous minister of the congregation I served. He had been there in the 1950s and early 1960s. He told me what it was like – the church was going like a train. Youth Groups and Sunday Schools with hundreds of people. Full churches. And so on. And then he said, poignantly, we didn't take the opportunity to get ready for what we sensed was coming. When the culture changed, we hadn't maintained the practices that enabled us to change with it. And he said, wistfully, why would we disturb what people evidently liked, by getting ready for something about which we were not sure? Being ready.

In the parable, the wise ones were prepared for the bridegroom's absence. These five did what was necessary while the bridegroom remained away, symbolised by their surplus lamp oil. The others, the foolish ones, are exposed when they find their lamps empty at the big moment. They didn't equip themselves to wait so they weren't ready to share the party with the bridegroom when he turned up.

Faithful readiness is active readiness. Even though the wedding banquet hasn't yet begun, together we need to act as if it has. To live otherwise is to be exposed as unaware, unattuned, inattentive, unready, perhaps revealing our disconnection from the bridegroom, from Jesus himself.

Most of the action in the parable takes place outside the door to the wedding banquet, in a world that waits. That's where we stand today, where sometimes we are overcome by sleepiness, where sometimes hope tires, where sometimes it feels pointless to get ready because we imagine nothing will change.

Faithful readiness expresses itself actively.

Our role as churches is to help ready our nation for the day there will be equal wealth, for the day there will be no racism, for the day no child will be poor, for the day imprisonment will be about safety, for the day people will be treated with respect.

Last year in Minneapolis, for a week I heard preachers from across the United States with a strong justice emphasis. They anticipated what we are seeing in USA: the barriers people face in registering to vote and then in voting. In that whole week, the President's name was used only once, because people realised they needed to attend to the deeper dynamics, especially of racism and injustice.

Martin Luther King – “When evil folk plot, good folk must plan.”

Parker Palmer speaks of those deeper places where God is at work to which we need to be attuned. “... the heart is where everything begins: that grounded place in each of us where we can overcome fear, rediscover that we are members of one another ...”

He speaks of acting with hope in the tragic gap. “On one side of that gap, we see the hard realities of the world, realities that can crush our spirits and defeat our hopes. On the other side of that gap, we see real-world possibilities, life as we know it could be because we have seen it that way ...”

“ ... we must judge ourselves by ... the standard called faithfulness. Are we faithful to the community on which we depend, to doing what we can in response to its pressing needs? Are we faithful to the better angels of our nature and to what they call forth from us? ... Are we faithful to the call of courage that summons us to witness to the common good, even against great odds?”

When faithfulness is our standard, we are more likely to sustain our engagement with tasks that will never end: doing justice, loving mercy, and calling the beloved community into being.”

Last Thursday the 5th of November we commemorated the events of Parihaka on the 5th of November in 1881. The day began with a service on Rongo rock near Anderson’s Bay and it ended with a film here showing the children of Parihaka travelling the country to learn the story of Parihaka, including the story of the Parihaka prisoners here in Ōtepoti. What is this about?

About getting ready for the day the full story of our nation is known and owned, when wrongs are righted and justice is done.

Getting ready for the day our church acts maturely, with evident joy and generous love and faithful hope.

We’re outside the door to the wedding banquet, where we need the disciplines of spirit that prepare us to wait, that ready us for when God turns up, that sustain us with the joy of anticipation.

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made known in Jesus, given in grace***



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