

*Let my mouth's utterances be pleasing
And my heart's stirring before You,
LORD, my rock and redeemer.*

(Psalm 19:15. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary.* Robert Alter, 2019.)

Sermon: Active Hope

The whole of the Christian Scriptures resonates with an early expectation of the return of the Son of Man, what theologians call the *Parousia*. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is clear "*we who are alive, who are left (not yet dead), will be caught up in the clouds together with them (those who have died before us) to meet the Lord in the air;*" (1Thess 4:17a). It's hard for us to imagine, 2000 years on, how fervent the early church might have been on this issue. Many of us have never been ravaged by persecution, by dire poverty, or by the need for the world we live in to end. No matter what our situation, the early church looked with sincere hope to the end of their current world. It may have seemed necessary for bringing forth the eternal Commonwealth of God.

We are mostly comfortable, not so interested in the world ending in our time maybe. But the early church lived and grew as outcasts and rebels. They were foreigners in the Hebrew tradition of their forebears and, they were aliens in a political world that demanded observances they saw as violation to their countercultural observance of Christ (1 Cor 1:23). So, looking forward to "*being with the Lord forever*" (1Thess 4:17b) could have been a pragmatic hope that encouraged active preparation. This hope was grounded in ancient Hebrew expectations.

In the model of Moses and Joshua leading the people from oppression and wilderness into the *Promised Land*, human preparedness for *Divine Intervention* was wise. It was going to happen whether you were prepared or not; so better to be prepared. For the early church however, Divine deliverance would be from the Romans, just as it had been long ago from the Egyptians and the Canaanites. Historically it took over 300 years for Rome to fall; but it did. In the meantime, the early church reassessed the immanence of Christ's return. Matthew's parable of the Wise and Foolish Maids was likely one of many expressions of that.

Preparation for the coming of Christ anew was, and I would suggest is, wise. But preparation requires knowing something about the occasion that is expected. Preparing to play basketball is not the same as preparing to go on a vacation. So, first we need to know what the early church expected the Commonwealth of God to be like. There's plenty of Biblical references to assist us; Matthew himself cites 11; "*The Kingdom of God is like a man who sowed good seed (Matt 13:24); the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed (Matt 13:31); it's like leaven (Matt 13:33); it's like treasure hidden (Matt 13:44); it's like a pearl of great price (Matt 13:45); and so on (Matt 13:47,52; 18:23; 20:1; 22:2; 25:14).*

New Testament scholar and historian of early Christianity, John Dominic Crossan, summarises that "*the future or apocalyptic Kingdom of God is dependent on the overpowering action of God moving to restore justice and peace to an earth ravished by injustice and oppression.*"¹ Maybe believers can prepare for this Kingdom through proclaiming and performing faithful obedience to the One who comes, as the wise maids seemed to do.

An alternative view to the apocalyptic Kingdom, is the present vision of the Commonwealth of God. This vision requires wisdom too, in the here and now. This wisdom identifies that to live, *as if*, God's power and rule are present, is a sign of faithful observation for the world. In this, the wisdom to choose goodness, justice, freedom, to choose Life, is something like a faithful lifestyle choice. This view suggests that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, has, partially at least, *already* brought forth the sovereignty of God.

¹ Crossan, John Dominic. *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography.* Harper One: New York, 62-63.

This 20th century view proclaims that the Commonwealth of God is both already here, in ways that Jesus can be seen and known with joy and celebration, and at the same time the fully realised Commonwealth of God is *not yet* present. Our world, like the world of times gone by, is *not yet* the place of justice and peace that binds us all as sisters and brothers. So, if we choose to embrace the *already* and the *not yet* view of God's sovereignty, we may see this parable with a greater sense of active hope. The way I see it, this hope is a yearning, and even a kind of knowing, that in the end, the final consummation of all things, God will have God's way. Perhaps we are not called to sit back and protest about God's sovereignty not being here yet. With our lamps filled with oil, we are probably called to actively live in the world, *as if*, God's sovereignty is here, already.

So, I get back to the five wise ones and the five foolish ones. Remember they all slept, so being prepared is not the same as staying awake. They all seem to have some hope; they all have lamps. I wonder why Matthew began his version of the Gospel with a genealogy that includes women, who were of somewhat dubious character, Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. Is Matthew foolish? How does this genealogy help to establish Jesus' credibility? I'm left thinking that Matthew himself is both foolish and wise and that maybe he is quite intentional about this story. Is it possible that Matthew had women in his community that seemed polarised in ways that only a startling story could sway?

Imagine a polarised church, with two distinct groups, who both believed they had all the right answers. Would you want a leader to side with one group or another? Would you really want Jesus to step in and condemn one group and celebrate the other? Remember his genealogy, foolish and wise alike. I struggle to see God's peace and justice in that. So, I remind myself that all judgment, is God's alone and that judgment is more like a purifying fire than a condemnation to eternal hell. Maybe Matthew sought a deeper reflection on how all the women had lamps and only half had abundant oil. In the *already* and *not yet* view of the sovereignty of God, we are encouraged to find the Commonwealth now and also to actively await it with hope.

The foolish women didn't have enough oil, their light was low and possibly moving towards extinction. I know that at times when my hope and faith were low, when I was overcome with the horror and terror of life events, I couldn't see past the next minute. I'm sure I'm not the only one who's been there. But as I look back now, from a place of active hope, I remember the wise ones who came and shared the light they had. That light wasn't mine, but it was close enough to kindle a slow burning flame that drew me closer to the Christ light that burns among His Community. His light is *already* with us and it is also coming anew.

I cannot rewrite the parable, I cannot insist that the wise ones share, that the foolish ones are given the time they need to get prepared. What I can do is embrace with empathy the times when another's light is low and celebrate the times when their light is glowing. If we choose to, we can live with the knowledge that justice, peace and joy are already here to share, and we can live with the hope that one day, the lion will lie down with the lamb and the Commonwealth of God will be fully realised. My hope for this community is that we can be a place where the low lights and the high lights are embraced and shared and that each person has a place to live out their faith *as if* the sovereignty of God were fully *already* here.