

“Watching for the Prince of Peace” St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church, Hamilton
Remembrance Sunday, November 6, 2011
Psalms 78:1-8; Joshua 24:1-4a, 14-26; Matthew 25:1-13; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

There are always latecomers at weddings. There’s the stereotype of the bride being late, of course, which seldom actually happens, although in one wedding I did three or four years ago, the limo carrying the bridal party was held up in traffic behind a serious accident and the bride was almost an hour late! Even though they had phoned to let us know, much to the poor groom’s relief, and I had announced it, people were getting extremely restless as the minutes passed. These days, of course, most guests at a wedding service are not accustomed to being in church, and there they were, having to sit in a church for the better part of an hour with nothing to do but peruse the pew bible or hymnbook, or admire 1950’s vintage ecclesiastical architecture!

In the situation Jesus depicted in his parable, it was the bridal party which was waiting for the groom to arrive – the opposite of our custom. And that’s just the beginning of the strangeness of this parable for us, as they go on to bar the doors as the wedding begins and not allow latecomers in to either the ceremony or the festivities to follow. Who would do that to family or friends?

But a Palestinian wedding, certainly in Jesus’ day and still today also, involves negotiation between senior representatives of both families. What is to be paid as the girl’s dowry? And what are to be the conditions of her life among the groom’s family? How will she be supported, and what is expected of her?

Negotiations can take several days, even a week or more, and the bride and her bridesmaids, the groom and his friends, the caterers, the musicians, the photographers, all just have to wait for the respective elders to come to an agreement. But when they finally have a deal, in the middle of the night, of course, as the two patriarchs shake hands, the groom is told and he immediately goes out to fetch his bride and her party.

Everybody drops whatever else they’re doing as the food, the music, the pictures, all held in near-readiness, are pulled together. Invited guests have been expecting this – they, too, drop everything and go to the groom’s family home for the wedding. And when the groom arrives at his bride’s home to summon her, she and her party will have to be ready to go at a moment’s notice, at any time of day or night.

Once the bride and bridegroom arrive for the wedding and the doors are closed behind them, no one else is admitted. If it is night, everyone in this final, hurried procession will need working lamps, for anyone found out in the street at night without a light is assumed to not want to be seen – that is, is assumed to be a criminal, up to no good.

So this is the situation of the girls caught without enough oil for their lamps – they can’t go through the streets at night to the wedding without the oil for their lamps, but by the time they are able to get it, it’s too late, the doors at the groom’s family home are shut and they can’t get

in to the wedding. They weren't ready – and the rationale for not admitting them, I suppose, would be that if they had cared enough, they would have been ready. If they don't care enough to make sure they will be able to be there, well, forget it.

In the cluster of parables in which this one occurs in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is speaking to his disciples about the coming of the kingdom of God and God's reign of peace and justice. They, of course, were intimately familiar with Palestinian weddings and didn't need all of the forgoing explanation for the parable to instantly convey Jesus' meaning with power and clarity.

He's saying to them, "Look, when the Son of Man returns and the kingdom of God comes in its fullness, it will be like when a bridegroom comes for his bride: things will happen really quickly. "So you've got to pay attention, you've got to be ready. "Don't be complacent about God's kingdom and its coming, and don't be caught off guard and so not get to be part of it. "For just like a wedding banquet celebrates the coming together of the groom and his bride, so this is a banquet in celebration of the triumph of the Prince of Peace."

Ah, yes – The Prince of Peace. Remember him? As Isaiah put it, "For us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called, Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, *Prince of Peace*. "Of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end. "The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this."

Today we remember again that hope for peace, and times when that hope has been dashed. Today we remember war, and those who fought in war, and especially those who did not come back from fighting in war, those who did not come home again. We honor them as we lift up their memories to God in prayer, and simultaneously lift up our hope for peace.

But while we hope for an end to war and pray for peace, do we remember what causes war, and what real peace is? Do we remember how conflict between people and communities is rooted in their self-serving at one another's expense? How individuals, tribes, parties, classes, nations, empires, alliances serve their own interests as though others' interests were simply invalid? And how once the killing starts over these things, the pain and anger and grief over it seems to justify for us almost anything by way of getting back?

When we do it, we call it justice – when others do it against us or others whom it is in our interest to favour, we call it evil, atrocity, and crime against humanity. And it's not easy for any of us to see our way out of this. But is it not in this self-serving and its consequences that humanity really fails both God and itself?

What makes Jesus the Prince of Peace is his being there for others, for us – his love for us setting his own self-interest aside to concern himself exclusively with our well-being. If his peace forms us, we will find peace – and become peacemakers ourselves.

In those moments when we realize that in our encounter with someone else he himself has met us in his being there for others, we catch the vision of his peace as he invites us to take it up and put flesh – our own flesh – on it.

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,” wrote St. Francis of Assisi. “Where there is hatred, let me sow love... “Where there is injury, your pardon...”

Those moments of peace portend Jesus’ coming to this world, but we are often oblivious to them and miss them because we are not well-prepared for his coming. Those five foolish bridesmaids weren’t bad girls – they were just careless and not well-focused on what really mattered. And in their carelessness they found themselves without what they needed to take part in the celebration when its time had finally arrived. We need to *watch for* the Prince of Peace, and make sure we have what we need in order to *go with him*.

It will not be news to anyone that the world today is becoming more secular, and that the traditional place of the church in society continues to erode. We who remain in the church in the midst of this transition aren’t necessarily sure anymore what it means to be a Christian in the world today, what it means to be the church.

What really is the peace of Christ? The Peace of Versailles, now, that we know. We know the peace after Hiroshima. We know the peace of Mutually Assured Destruction. We know the peace that comes through the vigilance of the constant high security alert.

Are these things the peace of Christ? If not, what is left? Are we like the bridesmaids who ran out of oil?

Do we even *know* Jesus, so that we can recognize the Prince of Peace when he comes to us in his being there for others and go with him? Is Jesus just the traditional religious figure for us who are still religious in this particular way – you know, the guy in the stained glass window? Is he just the one who swoops in to save us from our sins so we get to go to heaven when we die? Or is he the one in whom we really live now, who really forms our life now after his own?

Far from being abstract theological questions, those are actually the most practical questions in the world – and the most important. How so? Because our free, willing, joyful, creative participation in the coming of Christ to this world and in the peace he brings depends on the right answers to them.

Otherwise, he comes near us and we don’t recognize him, and so are just more people saying, “Peace, peace” where there is no peace, albeit supposedly in the name of Jesus. And if that’s all we can do, the world is quite right, it doesn’t need us. It doesn’t need us to make a big religious fuss while doing only what it can and does do very well for itself!

But the real way of Jesus Christ, his being there for others and not first of all for himself, is the way of peace. It is! So the best way to lift up to God the memories of those who have died in war is to be *alert*, to *watch* for those moments when you can see Jesus’ face in the face of others, and can sense his will to be present in you, that they too may see his face.

Then go with him, just get up and go – and *be a peacemaker* in a world that hopes for peace, but doesn’t really know what peace is made of, or who has it to bring.

INJ. Amen.