

# Sermon notes

## On being prepared

**Bible readings:**  
Amos 5:18-24;  
Matthew 25:1-13

### **Introduction: themes of judgement and salvation**

This story, about getting ready for a wedding banquet, forms part of two chapters (24 and 25) in Matthew's gospel, which are about the 'end times', and about the parousia – that is, the returning of Christ in glory at the end of history to judge the world, the day of the Lord. Matthew is writing after the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in AD70 and no doubt the terrible calamity that that represented, and the fearful conditions it brought about, were vividly in his mind. And Matthew, much more than Mark or Luke, emphasises the apocalyptic teachings of Jesus on the final judgement and the passing away of the old order and ushering in of the new. Like many of the early Christians, he believed that the end was coming very soon, perhaps within his lifetime, and therefore that people had to be prepared.

So this is a context in which we are considering themes of judgement and salvation. The awful horrors of the end have been described in chapter 24: their imminence – they are close – but also their unpredictability – no one knows the precise time. Being ready is crucial. People must learn to read the signs of the times. But it is not enough just to be watchful, or even to be discerning. This is a wake-up call to action, to change one's life and practice.

### **Being prepared for the moment**

In today's story, we hear of 10 young women waiting for the bridegroom, to go with him to the bride's house where the wedding will take place. They represent the people of God waiting for the return of the Lord, and they include within their number both those who are prepared for him to come earlier or later than predicted, and with great suddenness, and those who are quite unprepared, perhaps feeling that there is plenty of time and they can always put it off until tomorrow. There is an emphasis here on an opportunity that will only come once, and if it

is missed it'll be gone for good. Thoughtlessness, lack of foresight, irresponsibility – the reasons will not matter; the outcome will be that entry to the marriage feast, a symbol of the joy and celebration of the kingdom, will be denied them. They will be too late, and the door will be shut. But for those who had thought ahead and were ready when the bridegroom came, the celebration would go on.

The end time did not come when Matthew expected it, nor indeed when many millions of other people throughout the intervening centuries expected it. Indeed, Jesus warned his followers not to think they could predict when the end times would come. Instead, he told them to go on living faithfully and hold to the gospel.

### **Holding firm to the gospel**

It's important to remember that all the stories in Matthew 24 and 25 stress the importance of attentiveness to God's call to justice and compassion. That's spelt out in the parable of the sheep and the goats; to be faithful means to welcome the stranger, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoner. It is absolutely practical, down-to-earth and applied. It's both a personal and a political call; it's to nations and to individuals. And it echoes the call of a long line of Hebrew prophets, like Amos, who spoke on behalf of a Lord who demanded this kind of faithfulness. *I hate your religious festivals; I cannot stand them... stop your noisy songs; I do not want to listen to your harps. Instead, let justice flow like a stream, and righteousness like a river that never goes dry.* (Good News Translation)

We can surmise that Amos was not against festivals and songs per se, but he was deeply opposed to the idea that they were an adequate substitute for justice and mercy; no religious community could get away with the idea that all God wanted was a spiritual response empty of practical consequences. This is a key theme of today's gospel – we are accountable not only (and perhaps even not so much) for what we do as for what we fail to do. To use religious language again, our sins of omission are as important as our sins of commission. We might say today that we are judged as individuals and as a nation not only by what we do for the least important and least visible in the eyes of the world, but also by the extent to which we fail to do these things.

Increasingly across the world, the work of Christian Aid is concerned with helping people whose lives have been affected by unpredictable climate change. People sometimes ask why organisations like Christian Aid, whose purpose is to overcome global poverty, should be concerned with climate change. But we know from our own experience in poor countries that climate change is putting the poorest most at risk of losing their homes, land, livelihoods and security. It's causing huge poverty in already poor places.

Some years ago, searching for the reasons why people in the West do not take ecological issues seriously enough, Jonathan Porritt said: 'Simply, not enough people are dying yet in our countries... of UV rays or from pollution toxification illnesses. Nor are enough coastal communities drowning yet from rising sea levels due to global warming. The visible, tangible, avoidable consequences of eco-disaster are not yet powerful enough to persuade sufficient people to change today's priorities.'

But they're dying in the countries of the global South. Climate change is happening today; there is no denying this. The science proves it and the impacts are many.

In Bolivia, the weather is warming fast; the glaciers on the mountains of the high Andes are melting, threatening water reserves and the disappearance of drinking water.

In Malawi, subsistence farmers make up the majority, and every one of them is dependent on the rains for their crops to grow. Erratic and unpredictable rains can affect their crops and ability to feed themselves.

In Bangladesh, severe weather disasters are likely to increase. Soil and fresh water become salted. Sea levels are not simply a statistic but a matter of life and death.

In El Salvador, climate change has brought about erratic weather patterns, causing a toxic combination of flooding and drought for poor communities.

In Brazil, illegal logging is devastating the Amazon rainforest, the green lung on which all of us depend as it stores up to 120 billion tons of carbon.

None of these people have more than a minimal responsibility for the emissions that have caused, and continue to exacerbate, the current crisis. Across the world, it is the poorest, those who are least wasteful and drain least resources, who suffer first and most from the effects of climate change. The injustice of this is profound. Yet in all of these places, sisters and brothers are working tirelessly to save the earth and to bring about climate justice.

In Bolivia, our partner Agua Sustentable helped to build a reservoir that now supports families whose water supply had become unpredictable.

As well as helping to create practical solutions such as these, Agua Sustentable undertakes scientific and social studies to assist in supporting vulnerable communities.

In Brazil, our partner CPI helps disenfranchised communities to acquire land rights, which allow them to protect the forest from logging.

In Malawi, our partner the Evangelical Association of Malawi has helped farmers boost crop yields and increase their chances of survival by creating water-irrigation systems and pumps, among other initiatives.

And there are millions more doing the same around the world; fighting for a better future. Thanks be to God for their work and witness!

## The justice we can do

Believing, as we do, that we are stewards of God's wonderful creation, called to live in right relationship with the earth and all its people, this passage speaks very strongly of the huge importance of reading the signs of the times and hearing them as a wake-up call to action. The parable of the bridesmaids is an invitation to fullness of life, to celebrate the feast, and to take the chance when it comes because it may not come again. Being prepared is not the same as being cautious. It's a bit more like saying: 'There's a train coming, are you ready to get on board?'

Of course, this is hugely challenging to us in the West. But the power we have for good, to stand up for the earth and its people, is equal to the challenges. Here in Britain and Ireland, we have the power of democracy, of education, of free speech, of health and longevity, of science. We also have legislation that commits our government to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 80% by 2050. We should not underestimate what these powers can do when we act together, nor fail to use them in the service of our neighbours. We also have the power of our networks of churches, partners and alliances across the world, which give us close and direct links with the people who know most about climate change – those who experience it, and with whom, working together, we are both enriched and humbled.

And above all, we have the power of prayer and the gospel, and the power of choosing to live hopefully. And as St Paul says: 'Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.' (Romans 5:5)

*To discover more about climate change and find stories of people living hopefully, visit [christianaid.org.uk/climate](http://christianaid.org.uk/climate)*