

SERMON Remembrance Sunday 08.11.20 Anna Brooker

Good morning on this Remembrance Sunday – from the Neville Chapel in church. Thank you, James, for reading our gospel, but why on earth do we have a story about a wedding, today?

Weddings have been in short supply here this year, one postponed and others being planned in hope for next year. But in any case, a wedding with ten bridesmaids would make a pretty big hole in the restricted guest numbers these days!

As we consider this story let's bear in mind that in Jesus' day marriage was in three stages- engagement, then a legally binding ceremony of betrothal (remember Joseph was betrothed to Mary?) and finally the wedding day, when the groom, accompanied by bridesmaids lighting the way, led the bride in procession to his house for the celebration, and their new life together began.

Some weeks ago Alison treated us to a reflection about another wedding parable, in which the guests need to get ready in suitable outfits; today it's the bridesmaids being ready with enough oil. A modern-day equivalent might be the limo driver who runs out of petrol on the way to the church, having forgotten to fill up and with no spare can of fuel in the boot! He would not be welcome at the reception....

In summary this parable is about **being prepared**, and **having enough oil**.

Lets think about being prepared first- it takes me back to childhood as a Girl Guide, getting ready for church parade. Tiresome as it seemed then, I know I learned the importance of being prepared –taking time, paying attention to details, showing respect to others and being responsible for my own actions. And I am still learning!

In the story, the bridesmaids are all ready, but then the bridegroom is delayed, the wait is longer than expected. Plans are changed: will their waiting ever come to an end? They need to be ready for the long haul, however long it is.

Many have compared this pandemic year to wartime-my parents' generation lived through six years of global conflict which impacted all their lives, not knowing when or how it would end. We too need to be prepared for a long haul. I believe that in our remembrance this year, the resonances are louder, the focus sharper, because of the global crisis we are experiencing now.

Let us learn from them, and let us recognise that our current experience can form and shape us, as it did them.

Last year on Remembrance Sunday I spoke about a young DLI soldier from East Durham who was awarded the VC in WW1.

I mentioned that his grave in Thornley was later given a military headstone, which was unveiled by Captain RW Annand VC.

This spring, walking on Brancepeth Castle golf course, I saw the tree planted in Richard (Dick) Annand's memory, for he was a keen golfer right here in Brancepeth.

So I researched further and discovered that, following his war service and injury, he worked for the rest of his life on behalf of those with disabilities, notably at the Finchale Abbey Training Centre for those with hearing loss, as well as many other voluntary roles.

Richard Annand's heroism, his readiness to sacrifice his own life for others in wartime, was no 'flash in the pan', but the result of a readiness to serve which guided the rest of his life. That wartime experience shaped him, deepened his character and confirmed his determination to serve others – he is said to have been a delightful man, but never comfortable talking about himself.

Perhaps some of you knew him?

I hope and pray that this time of suffering and loss may be when we re-learn what it is to serve, to be ready for whatever we face together. We know that our wait may be longer than a year, and that it may *not* all be over by Christmas, as someone else once said...

So we need to be prepared, ready to serve, but to do this we **need oil** - that is resources for the long haul so that we can offer a light to others who may be in far greater need than us.

We've enjoyed Autumnwatch on TV this week. I was struck by the bird-feeder shots of long-tailed tits at dusk. They are stocking up on oil-rich sunflower seeds to sustain them through longer, colder nights. A lesson for us, perhaps?

A recent article by our archbishops, written before the current lockdown was announced, had the headline

'This is turning into a marathon, not a sprint'.

This week they called on the church to make November a month of prayer for the nation- Geoff will say more about this in the notices later.

When I first heard this, I confess it felt like another thing to do or burden to carry, but I was quite wrong!

Prayer benefits both those for whom we pray and us- because it opens us to receive from God, to be resourced, re-filled by the Holy Spirit. That's where our oil comes from!

Last Thursday evening, I went to church to pray, turning on the lights as a sign of hope for any passing by.

I received much more in that half hour than I gave and it was wonderful to be united with thousands of others, praying at 6pm.

As I walked back from church, I looked to the dark sky above the castle, full of stars, and my heart sang in praise of our amazing God who created all this and who watches over you and me and all his children.

God is not locked down- Jesus has broken forever the boundaries which limit human life, even death itself.

Outwardly we may be restricted, but inwardly we have freedom to live as God's children, forgiven and loved.

God's resources are not in short supply and his filling station is never closed. As we come to him in prayer, he offers us the essential supplies we need – the oil for our lamps, his Holy Spirit who brings strength, hope, patience and peace, for these days.

You may have sung in Sunday School - '*Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning*' and wondered what it about!

It's this story, of being prepared and having enough oil, of opening our hearts and lives to God in prayer so that we can be filled and resourced by him, to live for him and to serve others.

Let's take a moment of quiet to open our hearts to God now, wherever you are, in silence.

**Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning,
give me oil in may lamp I pray.
Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning,
keep me burning till the break of day. Amen.**