

MATTHEW 25:1-13
KEEP WATCH!

We're visiting a stately home today; it might be any stately home you've ever been to; you might have been there as part of a coach tour, or on your holidays. You've been inside the stately home to see its fine rooms, its pictures, its old furniture. The owner usually lives in one wing of the house, but he is away travelling; you will usually not see him anyway. Then you go out into the gardens to walk: there are some very formal gardens, some very neat lawns, a fantastic rose garden, large borders full of shrubs and plants; and everything is neat and tidy. There is not a weed in sight! You marvel at this, especially since the owner is not at home; the standards might slip! You meet the head gardener, who is working in the rose garden, dead-heading roses, though some of them are hardly dead! You get into conversation with him and he's happy to talk to you about the garden and what's in it and you tell him how impressed you are with the neatness of the garden, it is spick and span. You express some surprise that the garden looks so good, especially since the owner of the house is away from home. You say to the gardener: "you must expect your boss back tomorrow!" The gardener replies: "no sir, not tomorrow; I expect him back today!" Every day he lives with this expectation and so the garden is immaculate.

From the very beginning, Christians have had the expectation that Jesus will come again to the world. Jesus Himself promised that He would come for a second time and that promise inspired the hope from the very outset that He would come again. Everything that we're told about that hope and promise is that Jesus' second coming will be very different from His first coming: He will come trailing clouds of glory; His coming will bring the world as we know it to an end and time and history will draw to a close; Jesus will create a new heaven and a new world and it will be a day of victory for good over evil. The big thing we're not told is when this is going to happen and of course, this is the question to which we all want to know the answer; we've all seen people with sandwich boards telling us that the end of the world is nigh and we've assumed that there is something slightly eccentric in these people. In dismissing those who will try to predict and tell us when this will happen, let's be careful not to dismiss whole the notion with them! The promise still stands.

This promise has fallen off our radar, to some extent. 2000 years on, the hope is not nearly so keen; there is not nearly the same sense of expectation as there was at the beginning. Cast your mind back to the Millennium, to the dawning of the year 2000 and there were some people who retreated to the hills; they took supplies of food and found themselves a cave or cabin in the woods and retreated because everything was going to come to an end and they need to do nothing more for life and living. There were Christians in the first century who thought like that: "Jesus is coming back in this generation and so we need do nothing; let's not work; let's not evangelise; let's not bother with the way we live, with the kind of people we are; Jesus is coming back and as long as we believe that's all that will matter." So they sat back and waited, doing nothing but wait. Then, of course, nothing happened and they began to be disillusioned and some began to give up the faith, feeling disappointed and let down. 2000 years later, the promise has still not come to pass, and the whole sense of Christian hope for the second coming has fallen off the radar and has become something for the fringe of Church to debate. But it is still part of our creed; it is still the Bible's hope and promise; we still need to deal with it.

Jesus told a story about a wedding; the story is all about His coming again to the world and how we should think; what should be our attitude to this idea? A word about story itself: it is a parable, a story told by Jesus to teach an important lesson. This wedding didn't take place, but it is a story made up by Jesus to teach us

something; we should be careful about how we understand the story, and not try to make every element in the story mean something! In most parables, Jesus is taking an idea that people would know well and is making a story out of it so that He can teach us something important. Today, we have a story about a wedding to teach us to: *“keep watch...”* (Matthew 25:13), to keep believing, to keep having hope, to keep living by faith, to keep being right kind of people.

The parable is based on a typical wedding of Jesus' time. As we said earlier, the bride would get herself ready at home, waiting for her groom to arrive. When he came, they would go in procession to his house for the wedding feast to celebrate marriage, and the feast might go on for a few days to celebrate the wedding. In the story, the groom is late, is long delayed; it is midnight before he turns up. The whole focus of the story is on the young women who are there to celebrate with the bride and groom, the friends who are ready to join the procession. Some are wise, some are foolish: what makes the difference? The wise women had come to the wedding ready to wait, prepared for a delay; they had brought spare oil with them for their lamps, so that they were ready to recharge their lamps and join the procession even if it is late. The foolish women had not come prepared; they had no spare oil; when they asked to share, there wasn't enough; so they are left to go to buy some more oil and by the time they've done all of that and come to the groom's door, he turns them away. They might be gate-crashers for all he knows; the procession was welcome, but they were not part of the procession! *“Therefore...”* (Matthew 25:13)

“Every single hour of our life is marked with this one unpredictable moment when we shall stand alone and face Jesus.” (Helmut Thielicke) There is a deep sense of expectation contained in that idea; go back to the gardener in our stately home; there is a sense of expectation that the master will return today. The same writer goes on to say that we are “permitted to sit in the springtime sun and be lazy, without constantly thinking spiritual thoughts and consciously “waiting”.” What are we to do with this notion that Jesus will come again to the world? We could dismiss it as a crackpot idea, as some do, because it seems fanciful and has not yet happened; we could become so obsessed with the idea that we decide to do nothing but wait and so we sit back and do nothing ordinary in life but spend our whole time in study and prayer “waiting” for Jesus to come. The danger with these two extremes is that they both forget something important: to dismiss the idea is to forget that it was Jesus Himself who made this promise, so it's not an idea we can lightly dismiss; to become obsessed with the idea and to withdraw from the world is to ignore the fact that even Jesus didn't know when and that He told us to live well in the world and keep watch.

James S. Stewart was an eminent Scottish preacher of the 1950's and 60's. He was Professor at New College, but he also had been the minister in North Morningside. People used to queue around the block to hear him preach. I heard him preach maybe once, twice at the most. By that time he was a man in his 80's but he had lost little of his power. His subject was the second coming of Jesus and he lived in the academic world where people were used to taking things apart and not always putting them back together. He said that he believed that Jesus will come again to the world; why? Because Jesus has promised and if Jesus has promised then it will happen. What marvellous faith! That sense of expectation should be part of our Christian faith, that we expect Jesus to come again and that we hope for the time when He will come. Till He comes, we carry on believing, we carry on living life, but there is a sense of waiting deep in our hearts. We still don't know when, but *“Keep watch...”* (Matthew 25:13)

That day will be a momentous day. C.S. Lewis described it cleverly: Jesus is the author of time and history and if we see time and history as being acted out on the

stage that is the world, then Jesus' coming will be the time at the end of the play when the author comes onto the stage to take the applause of the audience. Jesus, the One who has time and history and eternity in His hands, will come and all of that will come to an end. Jesus is One who has all of creation in His hands, the created world and the universe and all that is and we have enjoyed it and we have spoiled it; He has created life and made us to live life well, but we have spoiled that too and evil has been allowed to have a place in our world. Jesus will come and will bring the world as we know it to an end; He will create a new heaven and a new earth and all that is evil will be swept away; it will be a new world that is perfect peace and light in the presence of God. What are we waiting for? Is this just pie in the sky? But these are Jesus' promises, so let's not dismiss them easily or lightly, even if most things in our world seem to point in the opposite direction and most people dismiss this idea as outrageous.

Peter had a sense of waiting. He wrote about it in his second letter. He talks about God keeping His promise; he talks about the day of Jesus' coming being unexpected, like a thief in the night; he talks about the world coming to an end. Then he asks the question: "*Since everything...*" (2 Peter 3:11f) "Holy and godly lives" – this is all about the kind of people that we are. This is about being people of faith, living by that faith in the real world. We are to be the kind of people Jesus wants us to be, people who love God and other people, people who trust God; we are to be people who worship and pray, people who love God heart and soul. Most of all, we are to keep being people like this: there are all kinds of things that might make us want to give up living life like this, but the key quality in all of this is perseverance, that we keep living by faith, that we keep loving God, that we keep serving other people. We are waiting for the Master to return, expecting Him today, as the gardener pruning the roses in our stately home; we need to put our lives in good order, living holy and godly lives.

Life with Jesus is full of hope, the hope of heaven and the hope of a new heaven and new earth. Without that hope, life is different: "I am nothing; so eat, drink and be merry because that's all there is"; "there is no other existence than this, so why should I bother making life of any quality"; "What is there but deep darkness and all this talk of God is but a lie". Life without hope is full of apathy and despair. Jesus brings hope: we will be with Him in heaven; He will come again to the world; He will create a new heaven and a new earth and all that is sore, all that is evil will be done away. What are we waiting for? Are we waiting for Utopia? Are we waiting for a classless society full of social justice? Or is our view of a secular world, empty of any kind of hope, waiting for nothing but the lights going out? Christians for generations have had this hope that Jesus will come again, full of glory and power; the world will be transformed; we will be changed for ever. Can we find a place in our hearts for this hope? Till then, we live by faith and keep believing; we learn to be the right kind of people and keep being good; we love God heart and soul and keep loving Him; we love one another and keep loving. "*Keep watch...*" (Matthew 25:13)