

MATTHEW 25:1-13
SLEEPWALKING INTO...

Are you awake? Are you paying attention? I googled the phrase “sleepwalking into...” to see what would come up. If you believe the news stories, then the UK is sleepwalking into a whole number of crises: we are sleepwalking into a surveillance society controlled by CCTV cameras; or we are sleepwalking into a crisis in the NHS, or in education; we are sleepwalking into a new arms race, or a global famine, or a poorer retirement depending on the way we use our pension, or an environmental crisis; rugby is sleepwalking into a concussion crisis; there is even one story about sleepwalking into a sleep crisis! The phrase suggests that these things will creep up on us while we’re not paying attention and that by not paying attention these situations will simply get worse. I don’t want to get into these particular situations, because there will be different opinions on the detail, but simply see how often the idea gets used, that we are sleepwalking into some future situation because we’ve not been paying attention to the society around us.

We simply do nothing and allow a situation to develop around about us. There was a book published a few years ago called *The Sleepwalkers* in which the author, a historian, suggested that the European powers were simply sleepwalking into war in 1914, that they allowed the situation to develop and did nothing to stop it. Other historians disagree with that idea, suggesting instead that these same powers knew exactly what was going on and plunged right in. We do nothing. It’s not that we do something wrong; we simply do nothing. The Church in Scotland is facing a future that has lots of problems and issues, but lots of us are simply ignoring them and not even trying to deal with them now; by the time we wake up to what is happening, it might well be too late; we need to be praying and making disciples now!

In Jesus’ parable about the wedding, five young women really did nothing wrong; the problem was they did nothing! Perhaps they were excited to take part in the wedding; it is a story, but perhaps the bride was a good friend and they wanted to be part of her big day. The custom was for them to wait for the groom to come and then join the procession to his house for the wedding party, but he was late. It was midnight and they all needed to refill their lamps with oil so that they could see to join in. These five had not thought to bring spare oil; they had none left and when they tried to borrow some, they discovered that some things couldn’t be borrowed! By the time they had been to buy oil, the procession was over and they were outside. They had done nothing wrong; they had just done nothing!

“Therefore...” (*Matthew 25:13*) Being wise is about doing the right things, the things that need to be done and doing them in good time. Jesus’ promise about His second coming is a powerful promise and for a good number of years in the early church there was a strong sense of expectation, Jesus is coming soon. Two thousand years have passed and that sense of expectation has diminished and some will even tell you now that it will not happen, that this is mere pie-in-the-sky. I’m not sure who would dare contradict Jesus? The promise has not gone away; the promise will happen. Being wise in the light of that promise means that we do things that need to be done and we do them in good time. Jesus says “Therefore...” (*Matthew 25:13*) We are to be ready: to live by faith in Jesus and obey Him and do good deeds in the world. That kind of living faith is the key to all of this.

We find the same kind of hope in the Old Testament. The Jews looked forward to the “Day of the Lord” as the day when Messiah will come and there will be a great banquet for His people to enjoy. It will be a great and glorious day when the Lord will be King and the whole world will recognize the Lord as King. It would be a good day for the Jews, a day when everything they stood for would be vindicated. Amos had a different take on this hope; he saw that the people were sleepwalking into a very different kind of future; the day of Lord would mean something quite different to a people who were living carelessly and without faith. Amos describes the day of the Lord as darkness rather than the light they were hoping for; he pictures someone running away from the lion only to be confronted by the bear and when he thinks he has escaped from the bear, he goes home, puts his hand on the wall and gets bitten by the snake! They have lots of religion, lots of ceremonies and singing, but it is

all show, it is all on the outside. Inside there is nothing, faith is neglected and the life of the spirit is empty. There is a remedy: “*Let justice...*” (5:24) these qualities of godly life are to be recovered and quickly, and the inner life of the spirit is to be revived; they need to be the right kind of people and soon, and now!

If there is anything that we need to know and discover it is the importance of what goes on inside our heads and our hearts. What do we think? What do we believe? How does that shape our lives? That’s what really counts as far as Jesus is concerned! It is the inner life of the spirit inside us that really matters, that we live by faith in Jesus and that this faith shapes our lives. The wise person will see that and understand that; it is not about what we do, it is not that we’re religious, but that we believe in Jesus. The wise person also sees that this kind of faith can’t be borrowed; we can’t live because of someone else’s faith, it has to be our own; we have to say “yes” to Jesus in our own voice and not because someone else has done it on our behalf. The wise person will also realise that there is a time when it will be “too late” and we might miss the party! We need to keep watch over our faith and nurture that faith and help it to grow by reading the Bible and praying.

Christians also have a responsibility to the world and all these other sleepwalking crises our world faces. Amos was an ordinary man, a shepherd who was given a prophet’s calling by God; he was not the most popular man on planet because he told it as it was; “go back to your sheep!”. In chapter 5, Amos tells the powers that be that there were things wrong, things out of sorts; there is all this religion, but no justice! There is all this religion, but no right living – they trample on the poor, they oppress those who want to do right, and their judges give the verdict to those who will bribe them the most. So there is a tendency for people keep quiet, to say nothing because of the pressure to conform. There should be justice for everyone; everyone is to be treated fairly and honestly. People are to live in right ways, to do what is right and to avoid all that is wrong; Amos will call a spade a spade! We have a responsibility to our world to waken it up, if we are sleepwalking into war, or into some moral and ethical crisis, or into a crisis of care for the poor, the elderly, or the vulnerable; or if we are sleepwalking into all kinds of situations where communities fall apart because there are no local services anymore. To those who make decisions by the balance sheet, we need to remind them that there are other values, deeper questions, and personal issues at stake too!

Jesus says “Keep watch”:

- Over our lives, to make sure our lives are the right way round, that in our hearts there beats a living faith in Jesus, that we love the Lord heart and soul, that we live life in the right kind of way and that this faith is ours, saying “yes” to Jesus in our own voice. Perhaps this is the most natural way to apply this principle of keeping watch
- Over our church, to make sure that the Church is the right way round. On Wednesday, we were talking about churches’ reputations; we have a reputation for being “busy”, but there is a danger is simply being busy, that being busy neglects the deeper things of church, the spiritual life, or prayer, or being the right kind of people. We need to have Church the right way round.
- Over our world, to keep reminding people who make decisions that community matters, that people matter, that they can’t ride roughshod over people, even (or especially) the poor and vulnerable, even those in faraway places with strange sounding names!

Jesus’ parable has five young women sleepwalking into darkness; they have no spare oil for their lamps and they missed the party. They did nothing wrong, they just did nothing. The wise young women were prepared, they kept watch, they had spare oil, they joined the procession and were guests at the banquet. Which would you rather be? Let’s not sleepwalk into darkness, but be wise; keep watch – let there be a living faith in Jesus inside us; let us love the Lord heart and soul; let us be a church in which the inner life of the spirit shapes all we are and do; let us love justice and what is right in the world. Keep watch!