

SERMON – 11/8/19

Luke 12:32-40

“Be ready for whatever comes, dressed for action, and with your lamps lit, like servants who are waiting for their master to come back from a wedding feast. When he comes and knocks, they will open the door for him at once.”
(Luke 12:35-36)

I want to start with a question this morning. Are you ready? It's a question that immediately prompts other questions and it's likely that all of you are at this moment asking those questions in a way that relates to your particular circumstances so I am not going to interrupt your train of thought by suggesting follow-up questions of my own because I hope that this morning's sermon can lead you into a conversation with God that will leave each one of us with something personal to go away with at the close of the service. Are you ready for that?

God's side of the conversation emerges, as ever, from His Word and in particular from the passage that we have read this morning from Luke's Gospel. Sometimes people say to me that they much prefer the Gospels to the Old Testament or the letters of the New Testament and I definitely understand where people are coming from when they say that, although I suspect that actually they mean a few favourite passages from the Gospels rather than the whole teaching of Jesus which in actual fact presents us (as it presented His first listeners) with huge challenges.

Here this morning we have read Jesus' words: “Sell all your belongings and give the money to the poor.” Are you ready? “How happy are the servants whose master find them ready even if he should come at midnight or even later.” Are *you* ready? When faced with a passage from the Gospel like this one, perhaps I would rather be preaching about David and Goliath this morning or expounding a passage from one of Paul's letters. What we have read this morning is very far from easy and I suspect that most of us are already feeling quite challenged if we have heard the voice of Jesus speaking to us today.

One of the great themes of Christ's preaching is the Kingdom of God – it's one that connects His teaching to the overarching message of the whole Bible. God reveals Himself as the King of the universe; the King of

creation; the King of His chosen people, Israel; the King who comes, gentle and riding on a donkey; the King who is lifted up and enthroned upon a cross at Calvary, who is victorious even in death and before whom one day every knee shall bow, and He issues His invitation: are you for me or are you against me? It's one or the other. In our reading this morning, Jesus is speaking about the Kingdom and inviting us to enter into conversation with Him about it. 'Are you ready?' Jesus is asking. 'Ready for what?' we are almost bound to reply. 'Ready to surrender to me as king,' He suggests. And that's where we all start to get a bit uneasy. What does it actually mean to be a citizen in the Kingdom of God? What does it mean to follow Jesus in the ordinary things of my life and yours? Are you ready?

Let's begin with that deal-breaker: "Sell all your belongings and give the money to the poor." Are you ready for that? In almost all cases, I suspect, probably not. Perhaps you remember the story of the rich man who came to Jesus asking what he had to do to receive eternal life. The Lord pointed Him to the Ten Commandments and the man blithely said that he had done all that, but he obviously still had a sense that something was missing. We're told that Jesus 'looked straight at him *with love*' and said: "You need only one thing: go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven." (Mark 10:21) Gloom spread across the man's face, we're told, and he went away sad and how many like him have walked away sadly from the challenge Jesus issues. The thing is, though, that Christ doesn't ask *everyone* to renounce earthly wealth. The point he is making, and he emphasises it in our reading this morning, is that our heart will always be where our riches are, and it is our heart that He is seeking. Whatever it is in life that we consider to be our greatest treasure – whether that is money or possessions or work or ambition or leisure or pastimes or family or friends or a significant other – that person or that thing has the potential to be an idol that takes the place of God as sovereign over our lives, and until we are willing to lay that one thing down, perhaps even to give it up, we are not ready to enter the Kingdom.

My friends, what is the one thing that you consider paramount and that you don't think you could consider giving up? What if that was the very thing that Christ asked you to leave behind in order to follow Him more closely? In my experience, those who truly come to that point of willingness to give that one thing up, to be prepared to stop doing something that gives them real pleasure, to be prepared to end a friendship, to give away their most

prized possession or even to sell up and give everything away, truly to yield their whole life to God in Christ, those are the people who find the deepest happiness, whose purses don't wear out, who discover untold riches in another dimension and who actually find real happiness here and now. Are you ready? The rest of that conversation is between you and the Lord later on. It may well be a conversation that lasts some time.

So are you ready for some more? In the words of our text this morning, "Be ready for whatever comes, dressed for action, and with your lamps lit, like servants who are waiting for their master to come back from a wedding feast. When he comes and knocks, they will open the door for him at once." (Luke 12:35-36) Jesus is using the image of household servants which would have been easily understood by his first century listeners. It was the servants' responsibility to be prepared to attend the master at a moment's notice. In normal circumstances there would be some routine – a regular time to rise in the morning, certain duties to perform during the course of the day and clearly defined tasks to complete before bedtime, but every now and then something out of the ordinary would arise, in this case the fact that the master was away at a wedding and would be late home. What if he would arrive at midnight, or even later? Would the servants be ready for action even in the middle of the night, prepared to do anything that might be required of them?

It is very easy for us to get into a rut in our Christian discipleship. We can do so even with the best of intentions. We come to church on Sundays; we set aside time to read our Bible and to pray; we have things that we do in the service of the Kingdom (as many of the congregation have been doing this last week during Family Week) and these things are all good in themselves, but often that is as far as it goes. From time to time, something extra-ordinary or unexpected happens that we cannot prepare for and the big test is whether we are ready for action in such circumstances, prepared to step up and do whatever needs to be done.

Jesus called His disciples 'friends' not 'servants' but I am reminded of the Garden of Gethsemane where He asked His followers to watch and pray with Him in His darkest hour. It was probably well after midnight and it had certainly been a long day in the midst of an exceptional week, but the disciples weren't praying and they were *not* ready for action when it counted for their Master. Are *you* ready? Christ exhorts us in our reading

this morning to be 'ready because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you are not expecting Him.' (Luke 12:40)

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians that 'as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes' and at the close of the service today we are invited to do that once more, not as a ritual but as part of our conversation with God. Let me encourage you to take that conversation beyond the word and the sacrament and really to make yourself ready for the coming of Christ whenever He may appear. Again the detail of that conversation is between you and God. What will it mean in practical terms for you to be ready for Christ? What will it mean for me?

Being ready to give everything away; being ready to receive the Lord whenever He may come – these are very real challenges and many fall away on account of them – but let's not lose sight of the prize. The Kingdom of God is not something that we attain through our efforts – it is the gift of God, freely and graciously held out to us to receive or to reject. And in some ways that is the hardest thing of all to be ready for because it is the complete opposite of everything we experience in this world.

Consider what Jesus is offering us here:

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father is pleased to *give* you the Kingdom.” (v.32) What a truly amazing thing to say – it bears much reflection. Are you ready not to be afraid? Are you ready to receive the Kingdom of God? Let that be part of your conversation with God this week.

Jesus speaks about a Kingdom where the poor are provided for, where purses don't wear out, where there is no theft and no decay. Wow! Are you ready to be a part of that?

In one of my favourite phrases in the whole New Testament, echoing what Jesus says here, the apostle Paul announces that 'our citizenship is in heaven.' Incredible! Are you ready to belong to eternity?

I hope you noticed what happened to those servants who were ready for action when their master returned in the middle of the night. He took off his coat, asked them to sit down and *he* waited on *them*! In the words of a hymn we sometimes sing, “we strain to see your mercy seat and find you kneeling at our feet” (Brian Wren) Are you ready for the King of kings to wash your feet?

There's plenty to go on, I think, for that conversation we each need to have today with the Lord. The ways of the Kingdom are altogether different from the ways of this world but it is for the Kingdom that we were made – we belong in that dimension, we find life in its fulness – satisfaction, freedom, peace, true riches, all that is summed up in the Old Testament word *ashereh*, the word that is rendered *makarios* in the Greek of the New Testament, that our Bibles translate as 'blessed' or 'happy'. That is what Christ is holding out to us today – the invitation is challenging but the outcome is indescribably good.

Jesus said, 'Follow me.' Are you ready?