

Wake Up!

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 November 2004

Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Let's bow our heads for prayer. Father, we pray now that you would meet with us and speak to us so that we might know the Lord Jesus. Fill us with your love so that we might wait for him.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Please sit down. Well, our thanks again to the choir and to Terry, the orchestra for leading us through this cantata, which begins, I hope you noticed, in the first chorale, wake up, wake up, wake up.

We should do this every Sunday. And it has been tempting to think that Bach wrote the cantata as a kind of cattle prod for a congregation that was not paying sufficient attention, that had become lethargic and sleepy.

And I didn't see this, but I know a true story of a preacher who used to preach very drowsily and would lean on a post like so. And I was not there, but I know a couple of people who were.

He went to sleep in his own sermon. Bad enough going to sleep in someone else's. He was an Anglican.

[1 : 27] Bach's problem was not a drowsy church. He did not write cantatas because he wanted people to pay better attention to the music.

He wanted us to wake up spiritually. You know, he didn't write these cantatas as pleasing aesthetic diversions, you know, to kind of fill a gap in the service.

The goal was not a work of art in their own. They were musical sermons, taking the gospel for the day and exploring and applying and expounding the text so that we might hear God and know God better.

They're not entertainment value. They're word music. They're not mood music. And this cantata was written quite late after a flurry of activity in 1731 and it was written to be sung on this Sunday in November when we look to begin the season of Advent where we rejoice in the coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas the first time and we look for his coming again a second time as saviour and judge.

And the whole piece is based on the gospel reading for the day which you can look at with me, if you will, on the front page of your purple sheet, the parable of the ten bridesmaids.

[2 : 49] And the thing that stands at the centre of this parable which is so easy to miss is that Jesus pictures himself as the bridegroom. Not a bridegroom but the bridegroom which was one of God's favourite ways of referring to himself in the Old Testament which is the furthest thing you can get from grim religious duty and observance.

This is a God and this is a saviour who reveal themselves as yearning to be with their people. He wants to dwell with us. He wants to be with us, to share time with us and fellowship with us and intimacy with us.

And Jesus chose this picture of himself again and again when he was in trouble for not fulfilling religious observances. Why don't you and your disciples fast, said the Pharisees.

Jesus said, the bridegroom is here. The party has begun. I take great joy in being with my people. You know if you've read some of his parables that he points to the kingdom of God again and again as a great big wedding feast.

This is why I have come, says Jesus, to open the door of the kingdom of heaven. He's come to draw us to God. That's not an abstract thing.

[4 : 11] To a feast of blessing and fellowship and joy. And the reason Jesus went to the cross, the reason he saved us from our sin was to bring us into the joy of God's presence.

It must not stop at the cross. It moves on from there. But this parable, as you notice, is not about Jesus' first coming. It's about his second coming and faces us with the most important decision that

we could face.

The story is simple enough. In the first verse on the sheet, Jesus says, look, I want to use a comparison to explain to you the coming of the kingdom.

And he uses as his comparison a local wedding ceremony. Now, couples were married on Wednesdays in Jesus' day.

And then at the end of the day, whenever the bride and groom turned up, there was a procession where the attendants would light torches and walk through the village so it would give this festive air.

[5 : 13] And when they arrived at the agreed place, they would begin feasting and celebrating, often for a week or so. Imagine a wedding reception for a week.

It's a wonderful idea. And in Jesus' parable, there are ten bridesmaids who go to wait for the groom with their torches. Five of them are wise and five of them are foolish.

And the groom is delayed as grooms are. And I have a whole string of stories to tell you about delayed grooms and brides, but I won't. Maybe another time.

They knew he'd be delayed and so they all go to sleep. A very sensible idea considering the serious partying that they're going to have to face over the next few days. And then suddenly in verse 6, the cry goes up, he's here.

Come out to meet him. But only five are prepared. Only five are wise enough to have enough oil for their torches. The other five, the foolish five, wake to realise they don't have enough oil to light their torches, which was the whole purpose of them being there in the first place.

[6 : 23] And so they ask the wise bridesmaids for their oil, only to discover there's not enough for all of them. And when the foolish bridesmaids go off to buy some oil, the groom comes, procession happens, they enter the wedding reception and then at verse 10 we have this ominous note from Jesus, the door was shut.

Then we read these words in verse 11, afterward the other maidens came also saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he replied, truly I say to you, I do not know you.

Watch therefore, says Jesus, for you know neither the day nor the hour. Now there are two obvious questions that take us to the heart of the parable.

And the first is, why should we wake up? This parable comes at the centre of two chapters where Jesus has been speaking about the day of his second coming, the day when history itself will draw to a close and we will stand before him.

Just a few sentences before, Jesus said these words, as the lightning comes from the east to the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. When he appears, then all the tribes of the earth will mourn and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven in power and great glory.

[7 : 48] And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call and they will gather his elect from the four winds from one end of heaven to the other. Now, I know there's a lot of nonsense out there written about these verses.

You can buy a series of books that have turned Jesus' words into a kind of a manipulative fortune telling. But Jesus repeatedly states in the New Testament teachers that no human knows the day or the hour of his coming and trying to create timelines and predictions entirely misses the point.

Jesus is not telling us about the kingdom of heaven as a kind of utopian dream that we manage and we control. The point of the groom's coming was that it was not a result of either the wise or the foolish bridesmaids.

They were all asleep. They were all greatly surprised when he came. The coming of the groom was not achieved by their great effort or by the fact that they had good prediction skills.

Just as Jesus' second coming does not depend on human power or human events. The kingdom of heaven is not cobbled together by our skills and our vision.

[9 : 03] It comes to us from God. There is absolutely nothing we can do to bring the bridegroom any sooner than he decides to come. We have no control over the timing.

There's a lovely section at the end of War and Peace and I want to say it that way because I've read the whole thing and I want you to be very impressed. The best part is at the end where Tolstoy likens Napoleon and the great ones of history to children who've taken a clock and they think that they understand how time works because they're just pushing the hands round and round and round.

But the great ones of history in our age and in every age have no idea how their calculations will work out. They flick the switches on the rails but they don't know where the trains will end up. But Jesus says history is moving to one single solitary goal. The arrival of the groom. And when he comes he will determine the end of history.

And I hope you agree with me it is an absolutely astonishing claim. It's an astonishing thing I'm saying to you. The one who said he stood before history the one who said he came from God to save us from our sins says that he will stand at the end of history and when he does he will bring all things in the universe to conclusion and to completion.

[10:29] Amazing. I mean we our biggest worry is how we're going to get through the next two days isn't it? The next two days in your calendar how am I if I can just get through these two days I will be or the next week I'll be okay.

Here is Jesus announcing that he will come from heaven as the fulfillment of all our dreams and all our hopes and all the history of the world will end at his feet.

and when we begin to see what Jesus is saying all the pages of our calendar that lie between now and then take on a different kind of perspective don't they?

None of us know how we are going to die but we know what will happen with the end. Christ will stand upon the earth alone.

Christ will stand at the horizon of our lives and all the zigzagging and crisscrossing of our purposes and of all human existence will all come to meet in that one point at the feet of Jesus Christ.

[11:32] So all the most difficult things that we face the surgery the children the examinations the crisis whatever that we face these are all stages along the way to that final point.

And one of the great pleasures of the Christian life is abandoning ourselves to that great expectation. We cannot see between here and then the partial endings of the different circumstances of our lives.

We don't know how God will fashion the near future for us but we know from the lips of Jesus Christ that the ultimate goal is clear and it is certain. We don't know the moment and everything that presses upon us is so madly important our careers and our success and our cherished feelings we don't know when these things will vanish but we know that when they do we will face Him.

If we miss this and if we act as if life is just going to continue without Christ coming we miss the point of life entirely. Every single point of our lives is marked by this one magnificent moment this one unpredictable impossibly brilliant instant where the Jesus Christ who loved us enough to come for us and live for us and die for us will come again as the groom to gather us to Himself.

Why should we wake up? The answer is because Christ is coming again. And the second question what does it mean to wake up?

[13:10] We need to go back to the parable. What does Jesus mean by preparing? What does it mean to be ready? What's the difference between the wise and the foolish?

What does Jesus mean to watch? And I think the answer is in verse 12. When the groom comes and the door is closed and the foolish bridesmaids are not allowed in the reason that the groom gives is simple.

He says truly I say to you I do not know you. The difference between the wise and the foolish is not because the wise were thrifty and clever with oil.

It's not because they had higher intelligence or better timing. It's simply this they knew the groom and they knew that He said He would return and their actions were governed by their relation with Him and they lived in the light of His coming.

Do you know in this gospel in Matthew's gospel several chapters before in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks about the great and terrible day of His coming and He says this Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord shall enter the kingdom of heaven but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

[14:30] On that day He says that day many will come to me and say Lord, Lord did we not prophesy sign your name and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name then I will declare to them I never knew you depart from me you evil doers.

Very searching words. In Jesus' mind it's not enough for us to look like we are Christian to have correct theology. It's not enough to be a nice person charitable gracious involved person it's not enough to do the mighty works in Jesus' name but at the heart and the centre of real faith is a personal living knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Wake up spiritually is to recognise in Jesus Christ all our hopes and dreams real life and real hope. It's to place trust in Him.

It's to relate to Him as a real person. Jesus is speaking about our true inner selves whether we know Him in our hearts whether we rejoice in Him and look for His coming whether we set our compass by Him by the joy that He is bringing.

And I think it's very helpful for us that in this parable both the wise and the foolish fall asleep. Don't you?

[16:02] I mean if you look at the wise and the foolish you really can't tell the difference all of them both groups are snoring away merrily and if you look around today you can't really tell who is ready and who is not.

It's a lovely picture isn't it? And I think some people have a view that the Christian life is endless work and endless singing and endless praying but Jesus puts both groups sleeping.

I read this week of an Italian art movement called Futurism it was in the beginning decades of the 20th century. They advocated a cult of restlessness of speed and dynamism they rejected the past in all its forms.

Their manifesto reads like a management book of today. It says we intend to exalt aggressive action a feverish insomnia we will destroy museums libraries academies we will sing of great crowds excited by work.

I wonder if Jesus puts this detail in the parable to let us know that being at rest and sleeping peacefully is a sign of trust in God. the point of the oil and you would not believe how much people have written about the oil the point of the oil is very simply this that you and I cannot rely on someone else's readiness.

[17:36] You cannot have a second hand faith. We either know Jesus Christ for ourselves or we do not know him. And I was trying to think of a story that would illustrate this and the only story I could think of is this terrible story and I apologise for it in advance.

It's about four people on a plane the pilot the Pope a UBC backpacker and the winner of Canadian Idol you know the pilot comes to the back of the plane saying all the engines have failed the plane is crashing there are only three parachutes on board I'm taking one of them and he jumps out and the new Canadian Idol stands up and says I have a new recording contract worth 3.3 million dollars I have 1.6 million people who love me because they voted for me I have an important career I deserve to take one he takes a parachute and jumps out and the Pope turns to the UBC backpacker and says I've lived a long and fruitful life in the service of God I'm at peace and ready to meet my maker you take the other parachute my son to which the UBC student replies there's no need to worry about that your holiness there are still two parachutes the Canadian Idol just jumped out with my backpack and the point is you cannot rely on someone else's readiness there are no spectators when the groom returns you must know

Christ for yourself doesn't matter how many members of your family or your friends know Christ you must know him the plain meaning of Jesus' words here and I need to tell you this is that it is possible to be too late the delay is fatal but our lives and our work are determined by this one fact that we will one day stand before Jesus Christ and it is he who will decide whether our lives have meaning or not would it not be a great tragedy for us to arrive at that day and for Christ to write under our lives a great performance a fascinating life and full of vitality but you missed the point would it not be a tragedy for us to turn up on that day and for him to say to us why do you think I died for you then it will be too late I wonder if you would just take your white hymn sheet out please and turn to the last hymn number three number three sleepers awake you can see on the top on the right hand side it says the melody by Philip

Nicolai arranged by Johann Sebastian Bach actually both the melody and the words were written by Nicolai 130 years before Bach wrote this cantata and we are going to sing this hymn at the end of the service you've already heard it once and we'll hear it again before we sing it Nicolai was a German pastor when his town faced massive tragedy in 1597 he was working in Westfalia when the plague during one year took the lives of 1,300 of his parishioners 170 people died in one week now what do you say in the face of such massive grief Nicolai to comfort his parishioners wrote a series of meditations called the mirror of joy and at the end he wrote two hymns this hymn is one of them and Bach was so struck by this hymn and the joyful hope of Christ's return that he arranged this cantata around the hymn and he did that by adding two things the first thing he did was he added words from the song of songs it's a book in the old testament about the delights of passionate

sexual love and you can see it in the duets as an expression of the love between Christ and the soul the second thing that Bach does is he gives us two melodies for the price of one he skillfully takes Nicolai's melody and writes a melody of his own and weaves them together so that they are one piece when I stop speaking very very soon the chorale that immediately follows you can discern two different melody lines as though two lovers are being brought together in joy and love for one flesh Christ has come to open the kingdom of heaven he has come to fill the wedding feast he will come to close the doors he opened the doors through his life and his death and his resurrection and he will close those doors so that those who are inside will enjoy fellowship untroubled we must prepare

[22 : 57] Jesus offers himself to us so that we may know him as we turn to him and place our trust in him and as we listen to these words and as we sing these hymns ask him to fill your heart with a longing and an eager waiting for him because salvation is nearer to us now than when we began this service the night is far gone the day is at hand therefore put on the Lord Jesus Christ and watch Amen