

A Sermon Preached at the Eucharist, Sunday 6 November 2011

Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle

The Dean of Newcastle, The Very Reverend Dr James Rigney

*Matthew 25.1-13*

I would like to look at this morning's parable from Matthew chapter 25 in the light of events that are unfolding twelve thousand miles away. These events might seem to be the problem of another cathedral but they are instructive for us here as well as for each and every Christian, communally and individually as they confront the challenge of discipleship.

As you may be aware, protesters from the Occupy London movement, part of a larger global protest movement directed against corporate greed and influence, erected a makeshift camp outside the grandeur of St Paul's Cathedral in London. After some attempts at co-existence and co-operation the Chapter of St Paul's closed the cathedral amid health and safety concerns. This was symbolically bad since the cathedral had only ever previously been closed for an extended period once before and that was at the height of the Blitz. The cathedral chapter then re-opened the cathedral but gave their support to the Corporation of the City of London, in the Corporation's plans to legally evict the participants in the Occupy movement.

Conflicts within the Chapter at St Paul's about how best to proceed in a way that expressed their responsibility for the care of the building and the maintenance of its ministry while making it clear where the Church stood on the matters of justice and politics raised by Occupy London led not only to a tortured process of decision making and revoking but to the resignation of one of the cathedral chaplains, the resignation of the Canon Chancellor, and finally the resignation of the Dean himself.

The recent events at St Paul's Cathedral in London have reminded me about its pulpit. The pulpit at St Paul's is a remarkable structure, the size of a small holiday cottage. Along with its size the other significant feature of the pulpit relates to the auditory delay in the building. As a consequence of the size of St Paul's there is a long delay while anything you say in the pulpit makes its way to the back of the building and then comes back. It teaches you to

preach slowly and reminds you that if you say something stupid in the pulpit you have plenty of time to reflect on it.

Cathedrals magnify the voice of the church; this is a factor of their sheer size. What is said and done in cathedrals has an impact that is proportionate to their size.

This morning's parable concerns the end of time, the day of judgement. It is part of the eschatological and millennial teaching of Jesus. Luke Bretherton, from King's College, London has written that:

The Occupy movement can be viewed as a millennial politics that seeks to embody the end of one space and time and the experience of a new space and time, one beyond the current liberal-capitalist order of the West. The invitation of the movement is to enter, if only for a day, an alternative future. Utilizing both an intensive (and at times seemingly interminable!) commitment to consensus decision-making and through embodying imaginative alternatives to a neo-liberal vision of globalization, the hope is that different constructions to the current political system, patterns of property ownership and capitalist modes of production and exchange can be generated.

All of which brings us back to the Cathedral. For what is a Cathedral meant to be but a place where people can come and experience a different time and space, can live, if only for a moment, in a vision of a different future, and thereby have reality re-framed? The challenge for the Cathedral authorities is not one of how to deal with the health and safety issues the encampment raises, but whether it's Christian vision of the end of days has anything to say to that embodied by the protesters on its steps.<sup>1</sup>

The Church has an impressive history of critical engagement with the Government and the financial institutions over the morality of the marketplace. Every parish, after all, ministers

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Bretherton, The Real Battle of St Paul's Cathedral: The Occupy Movement and Millennial Politics, <http://christianitycontemporarypolitics.blogspot.com/2011/10/real-battle-of-st-paul-cathedral-occupy.html>

routinely to the victims of the present unbalanced economy. The church is called by the events in London and around the world, to recover that role with all its demands.

The resignations indicate the seriousness of the issue. The Chapter of St Paul's will be aware that its new path is likely to demand more sacrifices: sacrifices of time and effort, certainly, and quite possibly of City donors. The cathedral faces the challenge to keep its own integrity, while its engagement with the protests will take it down an uncertain path marked by unpopularity with the Government and the City.

The effectiveness of that ministry brings us back to this morning's gospel. The foolish bridesmaids failed to understand that when you live in a time of expectancy about the return of the bridegroom, but without any certainty of when that time will be it is all the more important to keep the lamps ready even if they are not able to fully overcome the darkness.

The problem for the foolish bridesmaids is only immediately that they have not got oil for their lamps. The problem is fundamentally that they were not waiting expectantly. The opening words of the parable make this context for judgement clear: 'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom...' The object of the parable is to illustrate the vigilant and expectant attitude of faith, in respect of which believers are described as 'they that look for Him' (Hebrews 9:28), and those who 'love His appearing' (2Timothy 4:8).

Benjamin Disraeli identified London as a 'modern Babylon' in his 1847 novel *Tancred*, taking up a theme and an image found almost two hundred years earlier in the writings of the social and religious radicals of the seventeenth century. The Book of Revelation, the great text of end-time politics, depicts, along with a millennial time of peace and harmony a Day of Judgment when 'Babylon' and all its ways are damned. As with this morning's parable Revelation places this in the context of a wedding. We are told in Revelation 19.7: 'Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready;'

To live in vigilance means for the disciples to do the tasks that they have been appointed to do in preparation for the Master's coming. In Matthew's Gospel, those tasks include bearing witness to God's kingdom by welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and, crucially, making disciples in all the world.

In the light of this, we, the church, are the Foolish Virgins, since the bridegroom has already arrived - he is the poor, the homeless, the prisoner, the disenfranchised, those who have not heard the gospel, the 'least of these', as Jesus refers to them. And we, in the safety and security of our homes and churches have not been prepared to respond to the continuous gathering at our door.

This parable and the situation at St Paul's cathedral challenges us to revisit our eschatology - the part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind. To think that the Bridegroom has gone somewhere far away is to seriously misunderstand the context of the parable Jesus presents. The bridegroom is not far away. The demands of discipleship are in front of us. The costs of discipleship are staring us in the face.