

Sermon for 10th August 2025, Year C, Proper 14

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Luke 12:32-40

Sermon

“Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning... because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him”.

I don't know about you, but this immediately makes my stress levels rise. Who can maintain unrelenting attention on anything for a significant period of time, especially when you don't know how long it's going to be? Many times I've read bible passages where we're encouraged to pray continually, and despite the efforts of many saints to take this literally and repeat short prayers continuously under their breath, I've always felt that this couldn't really be what Jesus had in mind, especially when he spends so much time encouraging us not to be afraid, and not to worry about our lives, what we will eat and drink and so on.

In any case, too much attention can sometimes get in the way of many creative activities. Artists and writers, scientists and mathematicians, and especially preachers, all know that inspirational breakthroughs most often come when we let our concentration lapse. And workers in every industry know that mistakes and accidents happen when concentration is enforced for too long without rest.

So, there is little point me trying to argue that we all just need to work harder at keeping our focus on Jesus. This isn't something we can simply force ourselves to do, and even if we try, we'll simply get frustrated, annoyed and disappointed with ourselves. Even worse, if we ever succeeded, we'd mostly likely become proud, self-righteous, and highly judgemental of all those lesser, weaker people who haven't made nearly enough effort to stay ready for Jesus like we have.

No, this feels all too much like being told to smile when you don't feel like smiling. If you're in the mood, you can't help yourself, you'll be smiling all day without effort. But if you're not in the mood, and someone tells you to 'smile it might never happen', well, you can imagine the outcome.

So what I think Jesus is trying to do is not exhort his friends and followers to greater efforts of spiritual endurance, but rather to open our eyes to a different way of seeing the world, a perspective in which we have already been given the kingdom of God, adopted as his beloved children, and provided with everything we could possibly need for a happy, joyful, and flourishing life.

It's like one of those fairy tales where someone has been living a life in a drab, depressing world, where everything is in black and white, and then a colourful character arrives who shows them that the very same circumstances can be full of joy or misery, depending on where your treasure is. For example, if your treasure is in heaven, if heaven is your deepest desire, then selling your possessions and giving to the poor is an easy and joyful choice, that only magnifies your delight in God's love. But if your treasure is in your financial security, giving to the poor is a begrudging, difficult dilemma that may make us feel like naughty schoolchildren if we don't comply.

And so, Jesus spends most of his time not trying to give us more strict and difficult rules to follow, but rather to shift our perception, to help us to realise that God has already given his kingdom to us, we are already in it and fully belong to it, and most importantly of all, the Son of Man's impending arrival is not a threat, but a promise of blessing.

This blessing is the key point in our whole gospel passage. We are told to keep watch like servants waiting for our master, but there's no punishment for falling asleep or get bored and wandering off; instead, we're promised a blessing. The master, when he comes, doesn't demand to be served but instead fastens his belt, invites the servants to sit and he serves them himself.

This is the great twist in Jesus' story, which he uses to try to open our eyes to a different perspective. Instead of seeing ourselves as long-suffering worn-down slaves, clinging on desperately in our own strength, Jesus shows us a vision more like a crowd of eager festivalgoers, camping at the showground entrance, night after night, just to be at the front of the queue when the gates open and the party begins.

Jesus saying, "Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit" is like saying "Have your tickets ready and your tents near at hand", not because you'll be punished if you don't, but because what is coming is an enormous blessing and joy and delight and you really want to be ready!

Almost always, Jesus's teaching focuses on ways to receive blessing, and to clearly see the blessings we've already received, rather than how to avoid punishment. It's the carrot rather than the stick. And this is why it can often feel like there are two very different paths within Christianity: one based on fear of punishment, and the other on the anticipation of blessing. Almost everything we read in the Bible can take us down either one of those paths, but I believe Jesus spends the vast majority of his time encouraging us down the path of blessing.

Both paths will also reinforce themselves. The fear of punishment leads to constant insecurity, which leads to a resistance to generosity, and a tendency to judge ourselves and others strictly and dourly. The path of blessing, on the other hand, of giving away and letting go, leads to less anxiety, less fear and judgement of others, more trust, and, ironically, a sense of security that money can never provide.

The final question, then, for those of us who may find ourselves on a path of fear and anxiety, for whom the Christian faith has become a series of desperate beliefs and arduous duties to save ourselves from God's anger: how do we learn to see God as the bringer of blessings? How do we become a person who eagerly

waits for God with lamps lit because we anticipate blessing, rather than someone who only waits because of fear of punishment?

The first step, I think, is simply to recognise what path we are currently on. If we don't currently yearn for the blessings of the Kingdom of God like the deer pants for the water-brooks, or like the festivalgoer yearns for the beginning of their favourite summer festival, then perhaps we might have inadvertently gone off in the other direction, where everything depends on our own efforts, and we're always on the verge of failing, living in that horrible world of 'shoulds' and 'oughts' where we'll never be good enough.

But once we see and realise that there is, in fact, another path, where the Lord is waiting for us not as a judge but as a servant carrying baskets of blessings, the greatest miracle is always this: no matter how far we have travelled down the wrong road, no matter how many turnings we have missed, no matter how deep our anxiety and distress have become, the Kingdom of God's blessings is only ever one heartbeat, one prayer, one momentary step away. In truth, it's even closer than that. You are there already.