

Sermon: Matthew 25

King Jesus returns for justice.

I don't remember a lot about my time in Sunday school as a kid. But I do remember songs. That might not surprise you, I've grown to love music. I love the way songs manage to sink deep into our souls. They live there somewhere deep in our memories and I love the way they find their way to the surface when some prompt recalls them and the way they replay in our minds. I love the way I can sing along to words of songs I thought I'd forgotten.

Songs form us, they're part of what shapes the way we understand and feel about life. Songs give us a language that helps us express, understand and share our desires and hopes, our joys our griefs, our loves. *(When we sing together,*

"Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew"/

it's not an innocuous thing.)

Getting back to the songs I remember from Sunday school, - ***any young people here have to remember I was I was living in a time BC – Before Colin. We didn't have Jesus Rocks the World; we didn't sing Hooley Dooley Wop Bam Boom! Jesus Christ is coming soon.*** – I remember singing:

*Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning
Give me oil in my lamp, I pray
Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning
Keep me burning to the break of day*

And we sang:

*Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home*

Now, I had no idea what those songs were about, mind you. But they're there, somewhere deep in my memory, perhaps waiting for a day when I can make sense of them and they can start to shape me in new ways.

Here's another song, it's from the Bible, the book of Isaiah, in chapter 5 to be precise.

*"I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
my loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.*

*2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit.*

*3 'Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.*

*4 What more could have been done for my vineyard
than I have done for it?
When I looked for good grapes,
why did it yield only bad?*

*5 Now I will tell you
what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its hedge,
and it will be destroyed;
I will break down its wall,
and it will be trampled.*

*6 I will make it a wasteland,
neither pruned nor cultivated,
and briers and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds
not to rain on it.'*

*7 The vineyard of the Lord Almighty
is the nation of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are the vines he delighted in.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteousness, but heard cries of distress."*

Now, when Jesus comes into Jerusalem and confronts the injustices being perpetrated there in the name of God, when he takes aim at the religious leaders, accusing them of shedding blood in God's vineyard - and he calls them snakes, a brood of vipers, bound

for hell - and as the tension mounts and it feels like world is going to burst – and Jesus speaks to his listeners of imminent, cataclysmic destruction on their doorstep – we can be tempted to stand back and think, “Yeah, they really got what they had coming to them. I’m glad I’ve got Jesus on my side.” It can be tempting to disassociate from the intensity of Jesus’ message, as if it’s all just a message for them, not for me. But I’ve got to tell you, as I’ve sat with this chapter in preparation for this sermon, that’s not something I’ve felt I’ve been able to get away with. Jesus speaks a warning to you and me in this chapter. And it’s a warning that’s meant to disrupt our complacency and to realign our priorities and practice with his justice.

There are three stories Jesus tells to get us ready for his return in Matthew chapter 25, but really, the thread of his thought reaches back into chapter 24, where there are two other, very similar stories.

Jesus starts his theme in chapter 24 v. 42, where he says,

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”

Jesus starts to talk explicitly about his second coming here. As Pat helped us to see last week, Jesus has been giving his followers guidance on how to live when the world feels like its falling apart around you. I mean the cataclysmic event of his crucifixion is just around the corner, and then there’s the destruction of Jerusalem that will happen within the lifetime of those hearing his words, and, while were looking down the prophetic telescope at God upending things, is that the end of the world I see? Is that Jesus returning as the judge of all the nations? Well, yes, it is. And, all of a sudden, Jesus’ instructions about how to live life when the overturning of the cosmos is on the horizon become very personal. “Keep watch”, he says, “you must be ready”, because Jesus the judge is coming and, “you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”

Jesus’ first story is about a complacent homeowner whose house is broken into because, well, he didn’t know what time the thief planned to pop in for a visit. And the lesson is plain, be ready because you don’t know when Jesus is coming. Have you ever wondered why Jesus chose to represent himself as a thief in this story? It’s an interesting choice, and as we go on to read the other stories Jesus told on this same theme, you’ll see that Jesus doesn’t seem to have a problem using less-than-perfect characters to represent himself in his parables. We’ll consider this again in a minute or two.

Jesus’ second story, in verses 45-51 of chapter 24 is a particularly stark warning about the justice that awaits us if we allow injustice to take root in our own hearts and our own actions. It’s the story of a servant, who’s put in charge of the household while the master

is away. And the master is away for some time, and the servant abuses his authority...and abuses fellow servants, and treats life as if it's one big party for him and his mates – I don't know if you've seen the Roman Polanski film adaptation of Oliver Twist, but in that scene in the workhouse, where the starving children dare Oliver to ask for more gruel, Mr Bumble responds with outrage, and marches down the corridor and opens the door on another room. It's an incredibly jarring contrast, with men and women enjoying a well-appointed feast. It seems like they're the board of governors. And the outrage of the plump, gluttonous crowd around that table, that one of the ungrateful children could have dared to ask for more, is really quite comical until one of the one of them coldly remarks, "that boy will be hanged". That's the picture I get of Jesus' abusive servant in this parable, someone who, when given power or privilege, mercilessly wields it to the detriment of others. In Jesus' story, the master returns and administers justice commensurate with the injustice the servant had administered to others. V. 50.

"The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. 51 He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Shocking, really. But the message is clear to us, Jesus is looking for faithful and wise servants who will take their role in the administration of justice seriously, as he says in v.45:

"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time?"

And when I read that, I have Psalm 145 ringing in my ears. It's a psalm about God, who loves all that he's made, and gives them their food at the proper time. Jesus seems to be using God's own care for his world as a standard by which he will assess our own role as stewards of His creation, made in his image. And if God has given us the task of caring for his world like him, then it's only fitting that Jesus the judge should come looking for the wise and faithful servants who have done so justly. He'll be looking for people who've done his work in his world.

In chapter 25, Jesus goes on to tell three more stories on the same theme. As

/Chris/Pat read earlier, there's a story about 10 girls attending a late-coming groom at a wedding feast. When he eventually turns up, half of the girls had run out of lamp oil, and while they're off buying more at the last minute, they're locked out of the feast. And the groom treats them as if he doesn't know them at all. Now, I'm not going to pretend it's a straightforward story. The cultural customs Jesus seems to be drawing on feel very foreign, it seems as if it might have been a customary practice for girls to be involved in a lamp-lit parade when the groom arrived at a wedding banquet in first century Palestine, but whether there's any significance to that ceremony that we as an

audience are meant to pick up on is unclear after a couple of thousand years – and the resolution of the story, with the groom shutting the unprepared girls out of the feast feels quite abrupt, harsh even. I actually think that's the point, that Jesus' audience is meant to be shocked by the dismissive treatment of the groom towards these girls – As I mentioned earlier, Jesus often uses less-than-ideal characters in his stories, sometimes even to represent himself in some way, his parables have a very real-world, lived-in nature about them and Jesus seems to like to include an unexpected twist in his stories to make people think. Well, this parable certainly makes me think. But, however you decide to resolve the uncomfortable dissonance this story seems to induce, it's clear what Jesus wants his audience to get out of it. Here's his summary statement, it shouldn't surprise you by now –

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

There's an urgency and a determined perseverance required as we await Jesus' return. We might still need to wait a long time, so stay alert. Be vigilant.

And Jesus barely takes a breath before launching into another story, another one about a master going away and leaving his servants with responsibility – are you picking up on a theme? This time, he entrusts his servants with substantial sums of money but he's discerning about the amounts he gives to each servant. He seems to know which ones are going to bring him the best return once he gets back from his trip. When he does arrive, he settles accounts with his servants and rewards those who invested wisely and doubled their money for their master. But there's one servant who hasn't pleased his master, he's the kind of servant who's more interested in self-preservation than taking on a challenge. He's the kind of person you only entrust a little bit of money to, the kind of person who will bury their potential in the ground rather than risk exposing it in the unpredictable marketplace. And this servant knows that this is one of those stories of Jesus with a less-than-perfect boss, who has unreasonably high expectations of his servants and has a tendency to want to extract more than his fair share in business dealings. And so, he acts cautiously. He doesn't want to get on his master's bad side. And the irony is, He's right about the master's exacting expectations. When the master does finally return, unimpressed by the fact that he's merely preserved his money instead of gaining interest, he calls him worthless. He throws him outside into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus doesn't provide us with a summary statement to tell us what this story means for us, but I think it's fair to imply that it's the same as the others,

“Keep watch”. “Be ready” for the Lord's return.

In each of these stories there's a clear task that the subjects are entrusted with. There's a waiting period of undetermined length and, often a significant length of time before

the master/bride/thief turns up, and there's a calling to account of those not ready when the audit of their performance finally comes upon them.

And I don't think it's hard to see the pattern and work out that Jesus is telling us we need to be ready at any moment for his return. What may seem a little less clear is what Jesus actually expects of us when he returns. Surely, he doesn't expect us to put up a fight like the man whose house was being robbed. Surely, he doesn't expect us to literally go out and buy oil or to invest large sums of money. What does Jesus expect of us? Well, it seems to me that the last story Jesus tells, before Matthew returns us to a narrative movement that progresses steadily towards the cross, this final story here offers us an especially clear picture of the measure our returning Lord will use when assessing the faithfulness of our discipleship.

It's a story that starts a little differently to many of Jesus' other parables. There's no hypothetical scenario about a farmer in a field of wheat or a man preparing a banquet or a servant that owes money to a ruler. Instead, we're given a very stark, kind of literal, description of Jesus arriving to judge. See verse, 31:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. And all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

It feels like Jesus is stripping away any obscuring elements of his previous stories and just giving us the facts at this point. There will be a time, when Jesus, the Son of man comes on the clouds of heaven.

“He will be given all authority, glory and sovereign power”

And there will be a judgment of all the nations – a separation of the wicked and the just. And a determination of their eternal destiny, either fiery destruction or life – the kingdom prepared by the father since the creation of the world.

And it's at this point, when Jesus speaks so plainly about his return, and judgment and eternal damnation and eternal blessing, that we all start feeling quite uncomfortable. For a whole range of reasons.

For one thing, it challenges our society's insistence that I should be able to live my life my way. There's no urgent agenda for my life other than the requirement that I be an authentic version of myself. And if that's your friend's approach to life, how does the prospect of Jesus, returning to judge of the world and holding us all accountable for our lives sound? It seems like a fairly uncomfortable dinner party conversation to me. It's only a couple of logical steps from there to wearing a sandwich board on the street corner and crying out, the end is nigh.

This idea that there's an end coming and that people need to be prepared is, let's be honest, uncomfortable for Christians in the 21st century. And people outside the Christian community can find the whole idea of God's Judgment entirely offensive. Christians declaring that Jesus is coming to judge the world can easily come across as smug and self-righteous, hypocritical even – especially when this coming justice is viewed as an uncomfortable truth for those outside our walls, but of no moral consequence for those in our own pews and our own pulpits.

But let me see if I can convince you that Jesus is speaking, not just first century Jerusalem, and not just to people outside the Christian fellowship – but to us, the Christian church in the 21st century. That he's warning us of the peril of misaligning our values and our practice with the coming kingdom.

Much earlier in the gospel, in chapter 5, Jesus said:

“Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”

And it seems like Jesus hasn't changed his tune now that he's staring out at the end of the world. When Jesus comes, he is going to want to know whether your claim to be a privileged son or daughter of the Father is genuine. He's going to come to his vineyard looking for fruit – looking for righteousness, looking for justice.

Have you taken your role as a steward of God's creation, made in his image, seriously? Are you invested in to God's agenda, really? Have you, like God, used what power and privilege you have to give those he cares for their food at the proper time. Have you identified with the hungry, the one without clothes, the homeless, the one in prison?

Did you notice, as **/Chris/Pat** read this story to us earlier, how, in Jesus' account of the judgment, everyone's taken by surprise.

Jesus says to those he blesses with eternal life,

“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

And to those Jesus condemns, he says,

“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.”

And you and I sit here and say “huh?”. And both groups of the people in Jesus’ story say “huh?” When? Of course, I would have come and visited you if I had have known you were in prison, Lord. Of course, I would have fed you if I knew you were hungry. If you came to my door, of course I’d let you in.”

And Jesus hands us glasses to see what was right before us the whole time – his heart for the needy and the destitute. These are his people. It’s those in need that Jesus identifies with. It’s the sick who need a doctor. He came to seek and save the lost. He hasn’t kept his outrage at injustice against the helpless a secret. He hasn’t hidden his love for children, or the orphan, or the fatherless, or the widow, or the foreigner looking for asylum. It turns out he’s identified with those people all along. Have you?

When the cries of the oppressed reach your ears - when you hear about abuse happening behind closed doors - is your initial response to assume that what they’re saying can’t possibly be true? When the voices of marginalised people cry out in their distress, and their pain seems to demand that you consider how our society looks from an alternative point of view, is your initial response is to dismiss those voices because, surely the world isn’t that dark a place and, “quite frankly, I don’t appreciate the implication that I might somehow have some responsibility for your pain – that I might need to change my perspective or my lifestyle because you’re holding a grudge against the world.”?

Are you inclined to identify with those on the receiving end of injustice? Jesus did. And he seems to desire servants who’ll do the same.

Like Jesus, we need to be in the business of exposing and addressing injustice. They’re the kinds of things that Jesus gets most upset about in the gospels. And when he returns to judge he’s going to be looking for:

“the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time”.

Now, if a royal commission can bring evil to light regarding institutional responses to child sexual abuse, what do you think Jesus will say to his church? “Oh, it’s ok, you know I’d forgive you.”?

If a journalist from the Norther Beaches of Sydney can expose a higher-than-average rate of domestic abuse among regular churchgoing ‘Christians’ – and even clergy in our own backyard – what do you think Jesus will have to say to us? “Oh, as long as you preached the gospel faithfully, we can overlook a little thing like that.”?

Could it be, if you’re embarrassed by the prospect of Jesus returning to Judge, that maybe you haven’t grasped the good news that his justice really is. It is good news for poor. It’s a light to the nations. It does deal with the injustice that so easily finds a foothold in the human heart.

I started my sermon talking about songs I learned as a kid. At the time I didn't understand "Swing Low, sweet chariot" I probably connected the mention of the Jordan river with the Old Testament or something. That's about as far as it went for me. It's not until much later in life that the song revisited me and I understood it as a song of longing for release from oppression and injustice. Like so many of those old black spirituals – there's no embarrassment about the prospect of this world ending and a new one beginning – it's actually the wonderful news that fills the deepest human need – that brings relief from all the injustice; that speaks of home, when the very idea of home is a hole in your heart. Maybe a ship full of slave traders came after you to kidnap you and enslave you, and beat any sense of human dignity out of you for the rest of your days on earth – but look over Jordan, what do you see – a band of angels coming after me, coming for to carry me home.

Maybe part of the reason why we find this return of Jesus in judgment thing embarrassing is because we've forgotten to identify with the vulnerable.

The justice of Jesus truly is good news for all the nations.

And the darkness that Jesus endured, the injustice that he willingly suffered, says to those who suffer, "You're not on your own". And it says to us, today, that dark place you might be in, even if it's a darkness of your own making – and even if that darkness has spread like an infection to others around you as it tends to do – it's like Jesus says, I'll get in that hole with you – because I came to seek and save the lost – now let's shine a light in that place. And now let's rise out that hole together.

Now, I'm not pretending that's easy. I guess my challenge to you is this – as painful as the exposure of your darkness to the light of Christ might be - you know when you wake up in the morning and someone has all the lights on – as painful as that is, wouldn't it be better to wake up to that searing blaze now? To start to see the fruit of repentance growing on your heart and in your life now? To be on the side of justice when Jesus arrives? To be one of those sheep in Jesus' story, waking up to the familiar embrace of the king who identifies with the broken, a childlike recipient of your eternal inheritance...

"the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world".