

It has been estimated that the average person spends between 3 and 5 years of their lives waiting. Waiting to be served at the shop, waiting on hold on the phone, waiting at the traffic lights, waiting for the train or bus, waiting to see the doctor and so on. Add it all up and it can apparently take up to 5 years of our lives. There is, however, a sense in which Christians spend all their lives waiting. We are waiting for our hope to arrive in full - the vibrant, wonderful future God has in store for his people. It is a glorious hope of inhabiting a new perfect creation with our resurrected, imperishable, Spirit-controlled bodies. It will be a place of righteousness, peace and rest created for, ruled over by and united under Jesus Christ. Last time we saw that our hope will finally arrive when Jesus returns as judge of all the earth - at which time the present creation will disappear in a roar, and new heavens and a new earth will be ushered in.

We certainly, as Christians, have an incredible eternal future ahead of us! But what should we be doing NOW to prepare for it? Is there anything we can be doing to get ready for when our firm and secure hope becomes reality? How do we wait well for Jesus' return?

Jesus told two parables which help us to answer this question - the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matthew 25:1-13) and the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). Both parables focus on a sudden visit that exposes two types of people - those who have waited well for the visit and those who have not. At first reading it might seem as if one parable would have been enough to get the message across. But Jesus always chooses his words carefully and there are important differences between the two parables. In particular, in the first parable, the two groups of virgins are described as being either "foolish" or "wise". In the second parable, the two types of servants are described as being either "wicked and lazy" or "good and faithful". This word choice is worth pondering, as it takes us to the heart of what it means to wait properly for Jesus' return and the arrival of the new creation.

1. Wise Waiting

As we saw at the last Combined Service in March, the wise virgins were those who thought through the possibility of the bridegroom being delayed and so took extra oil for their lamps. They planned ahead, looked to the future and made their decisions accordingly. Wise waiting for Jesus' return is the same. The wise follower of Jesus looks to the future, appreciates that their eternal inheritance is in the new creation and therefore shapes their plans and priorities accordingly. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus describes this as seeking first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). Waiting wisely involves training our minds and focusing our thinking so that our behaviour is appropriate. It involves spending time in the Bible and aligning our minds with the mind of Christ. It involves thinking beyond this world to the world to come. And it affects every area of our lives - how we treat our spouses, how we raise our children, how we choose our friends, how we weigh up ideas and make decisions, how we spend our money, how we conduct ourselves at work, how we use our free time and so on. In all these things we ask ourselves, "How is this action shaped by my hope in eternity and the new creation?" Testing everything we do in this way is the difference between being foolish and being wise as we wait for Christ's return.

2. Faithful Waiting

Jesus' parable about the servants and the talents focuses on quality of action - being faithful or slothful. "Slothful" is the word that the ESV translation uses (the NIV uses "lazy") - and it is wonderfully vivid. If you've seen a sloth in the zoo you can picture a slow-moving mammal, sluggishly plodding along a branch - heavy, dull and listless. It is not how any of us want to be described. In Jesus' parable, the slothful servant is contrasted with the two faithful servants who each invest their master's money in order to further add to his wealth. These servants are a picture of diligence, creativity and useful service. And this is how we are to live as servants of Christ as we wait for his return. We

(Matthew 25:1-30; Hebrews 10:19-25; 1 John 3:1-3)

strive to be productive and effective for the arrival of our master. It is for this reason that Paul speaks of “straining toward what is ahead” and “pressing on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

The New Testament provides lots of insights as to how we can go about doing this. The passage we read from Hebrews 10 (vv.19-25) is helpful in this regard. It begins by reminding us of the confidence we have before God because of Jesus Christ, the perfect priest, who makes his people perfect by offering the perfect sacrifice for their sin. Two particular activities follow as a result of our “full assurance of faith”, namely, we strive to stay loyal to Jesus ourselves, and we strive to help others do the same.

(a) Staying Loyal to Jesus

The writer of Hebrews urges his readers to “hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (v.23). In other words, the fact that God is faithful to us should cause us to be faithful to him all the more. Since God will never let us down, it would be crazy to let go of him and drift away. So the thought of giving up on Jesus is not an option. Similarly, laziness towards Jesus - not an option. Indifference towards Jesus - not an option. Disobedience - not an option. The stakes are too high for any of these things to be options. For our goal is to live and reign with Christ in the new creation (2 Timothy 2:11-13).

The motto of the United States Marine Corps is “semper fidelis”, Latin for “always faithful”. What a powerful slogan. Always faithful. Not sometimes faithful. Not usually faithful. Not even mostly faithful. Always faithful. No mitigating circumstances. No escape clauses. No excuses. It doesn't matter if it's inconvenient. It's irrelevant whether or not I gain personal happiness. I reckon it's a great slogan for us as Christians. We are always faithful to our master. We stick with Jesus through thick and thin. We persevere and never give up even when the going gets tough. Why wouldn't we keep going? He has reserved a place for us in the new heavens and the new earth and on that last great day the words we are longing to hear are, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23).

(b) Helping Others Stay Loyal to Jesus

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews doesn't simply urge us to stay loyal to Jesus ourselves - he also urges us to help others do the same. In the passage from chapter 10 he talks about “stirring others up to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet with others, and encouraging one another” (vv.24-25). These are all important things to be doing “as you see the Day approaching” (v.25). Helping each other to remain devoted to Jesus is part and parcel of being a productive, faithful servant as we wait for the new creation.

This solidarity with other Christians is underpinned by something we saw back in our February Combined Service, where we discovered God's goal of uniting all things under Christ. Because we share this future hope with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we therefore live it out now. Sharing the same hope - the same eternal destiny - means we are eager to maintain unity with each other and we take seriously the role of helping each other (Ephesians 4:1-6). This elevates the importance of Christian fellowship and sharpens the focus of what we do when we get together, doesn't it? Christian fellowship is much more than having cups of coffee, showing hospitality and being friendly to one another. Real, productive Christian fellowship keeps Christ central by seeking to strengthen each other's relationship with God. It involves talking about Jesus with each other and meeting together to read God's word and to pray. It involves caring for each other deeply and especially making sure that none of us fall away. When life is hard, real Christian fellowship helps us stick with Jesus.

(c) Helping Others Become Loyal to Jesus

A faithful servant of Christ will also be urging unbelievers to repent and believe so as to become loyal to Jesus Christ, before it's too late. As we saw at the last Combined Service,

(Matthew 25:1-30; Hebrews 10:19-25; 1 John 3:1-3)

it is only because of God's patience that Jesus hasn't returned yet. God is "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

In the Old Testament, Isaiah wonderfully described God's punishment of Judah as a "strange" work and an "alien" task - that is, punishment is a foreign thing for God to have to do. He is in fact "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love". God wants people to be saved. He sacrificed his only beloved Son in order for that to happen! The implications for the faithful servant of Christ are obvious. If the only reason Jesus has not returned yet is so more people might reach repentance then it's not too hard to imagine what we should be doing while we wait. We need to be sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with everyone who will listen to us so that more people might come to repentance!

3. Godly Waiting

Notice that in the parable of the tenants Jesus declares the productive servants not only as "faithful" but also as "good". Correspondingly the lazy servant is also referred to as "wicked" (or "evil" in the ESV). Surely it is an indication that waiting well for Jesus' return involves personal godliness. This is reflected in Paul's letter to Titus in which he exhorts believers "to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:12-13). Peter says a similar thing in chapter 3 of his second letter as he speaks about the Day of the Lord; "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (vv. 11-13). Notice the link between living righteous lives now in preparation for a place of righteousness to come. Peter is reminding his readers (including us) that waiting for the new creation involves living out now who we will be in the future. Perhaps an illustration will help to understand this.

Prior to Queen Elizabeth II, Queen Victoria held the honour of being the longest serving British monarch in history. For 63 years she reigned over the powerful British Empire. One of the reasons why she was queen for so long was that she took the throne when she was only 18 years old. Actually, given the health and age of the rest of the royal family, it was pretty clear even when she was a baby that Victoria was going to become queen at an early age. However, it was decided that she would not be told this until she was 10 years old. And even then she was not told directly - she was to discover it for herself in a history lesson. Apparently during one lesson, Victoria discovered a page in her textbook that had been purposefully removed up until then, but which had now been deliberately replaced. It was a page that listed the line of succession to the British throne. According to her governess, Victoria noted with surprise that she had never seen this page before and - with much greater surprise - realized that it was she who was the next in line to the throne. When her governess confirmed the obvious - that Victoria would one day be queen of the massive British Empire - Victoria reportedly responded, "I will be good." It's a remarkable thing for a 10 year old girl to say. But having realized the high position she would inherit in the future, Victoria decided to live accordingly in the present. Because of who she was and who she would become, she chose to behave appropriately. This is exactly how the New Testament describes the Christian lifestyle. Because of who we are in Christ and what we look forward to as our hope, we behave appropriately. Our hope spurs us on to lives of godly obedience. We live righteously in this life, in anticipation of the next life on a new earth in which righteousness reigns.

We strive for godliness now, not to earn a place in the new creation but because we have already graciously been given a place there. This is what the apostle John was talking about in the passage we read from 1 John 3. We will be like Christ in the new creation. We will be holy as he is holy. We'll no longer be enslaved to the cravings of a sinful

nature. Rather we'll have that "spiritual body" Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 15 - we will be fully energized by God's own Spirit. John's point is that since we will be pure as Jesus is pure, we therefore purify ourselves now. We live out now who we will be. Or as Queen Victoria put it, "I will be good".

4. Knowing Jesus

Finally, notice the relational aspect reflected in these two parables. The foolish virgins are excluded from the reception because of the bridegroom's declaration, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you" (Matthew 25:12). Similarly the wicked, lazy servant claimed to know the ways of his master (Matthew 25:24), but his actions betrayed the fact that he didn't really know his master at all (Matthew 25:25ff). The people who didn't wait well were the ones who didn't really know the person they were waiting for.

What might this say about our preparations for Jesus' return and the coming of the new creation? Are you being productive for your Lord and Master Jesus Christ? Are you busy and eager to care for other brothers and sisters in Christ? Are you living a holy and godly life in anticipation of life in the new creation, the home of righteousness? Are you living in light of your Christian hope? If you're not, the real worry is what that says about your relationship with Jesus. When the end of the ages does come, your house, your car, your career, academic achievements, awards, sporting trophies, furniture, electronic gadgets and other material possessions will all disappear in a roar. All we will be left with is your relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul's testimony was that everything else is a loss, rubbish, compared to the "surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8). If you don't know the grace of God in Jesus Christ, then you can't expect to live a holy and godly life, for, as Paul makes clear in his letter to Titus, it is the grace of God in Jesus Christ that "teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope - the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:12-13). The grace of God in Jesus motivates and enables us to live under the Lordship of Jesus, to live in the light of our Christian hope. If you don't know the grace of God in Jesus Christ, then you don't really know Jesus and have the personal relationship with him that is the heart of the gospel, the core of the Christian faith. If that is the case in your life, then I urge you, plead with you to seek Jesus in all his truth and grace, receive him as your Saviour and Lord, by faith.

If we know Christ Jesus our Lord, then he is our constant confidence and constant delight - the centre of our worship, the centre of our gratitude, the centre of our love, the centre of our hope. And, as a result, we are looking forward to his return and waiting well for it, expectant of his warm reception with the words, "Well done good and faithful servant, welcome to your true home!"

Amen

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