

## DISAPPOINTMENT AND JOY

It must have happened to us all at some time or other that where we had wanted to go was barred to us, and the measure of disappointment we experienced was dependent on what lay for us beyond the shut door. For example, to shut ourselves out of our own house or flat by being without our key is normally no more than frustrating and annoying. To arrive at the platform just as the whistle has been blown and the barrier shut in our face is all that and more, dependent on where we were going, whether anyone was meeting us, and the time of the next train. The sense of disappointment is increased all the more if, for one reason or another we have been delayed on the journey and we find the door closed because the service has commenced at the laying to rest of a dear fellow pilgrim. Think also of the disappointed hopes if for similar reasons the registrars office door is shut, because the marriage ceremony has begun. The disappointment and the taking ourselves to task for not allowing more time for the journey is in such cases much more acute because we had hoped to witness and associate ourselves with happenings for which there would be no further opportunity presented to us. These are events occurring once in a life time, but in neither case, great as the disappointment may have been, did it have lasting effect on our lives.

Such experiences should help us to appreciate, however, something of the panic and consternation, the feelings of utter hopelessness, self recrimination, disappointment and despair that did and will grip the hearts and minds of those concerned in two events in the scriptures where we specifically read "and the door was shut". Here because of lack of adequate preparation in each case, the door was barred on life itself - and that divinely offered.

Noah's preaching for 120 years went unheeded by a world filled with violence and that had corrupted God's way. But the day of promised reckoning came. The faith and works of Noah and his family were completely vindicated as the door of the ark was divinely shut against the flood waters, giving those eight inside comfort and rest, deliverance and salvation, as the ark rode safely upon the waters of the deep. It needs but little imagination to picture the scene as waters from above and beneath engulfed what only hours earlier were self-satisfied, boastful pleasure seekers, confident that they were right to ignore Noah's warnings of such a catastrophe. So the simple faith of Noah based on God's knowledge to him of future events, which caused him to build an ark on dry ground, was more than a match for the wisdom of that antediluvian world which, having thus been condemned, after God in his long-suffering had long waited while the ark was a preparing - that world, being overflowed with water, perished.

We need no reminder of the fact that now before us is a world fulfilling as never before the Noachic conditions which our Lord and Master forewarned his waiting servants would herald his return from heaven. That return and our relationship to that great world shaking event is the subject matter of most of our Lord's words spoken to his disciples as they were seated quietly on the Mount of Olives and which occur in the chapters from Matthews Gospel record that we are considering.

The Lord spoke to them, his disciples, and through our daily readings of scripture speaks directly to us. He spoke both plain words and by parable. His words are both informative and exhortatory. They have always been timely, in the sense that the Lord's coming for each of his servants can never be farther away than the day of their death. But living as we do so evidently close to the time of the midnight cry

being made (of which we have read in verse 6 of Matthew 25: "Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye but to meet him", they come with added clarity and urgency.

This forcefulness and need for none of these words to be overlooked or delayed in their individual application. The exhortation indeed for us today and every day until we meet our bridegroom we suggest, can be epitomised in line with the thoughts already expressed by the words of the parable in the latter half of verse 10: "and they that were ready went in with the bridegroom to the marriage" and that as a consequence "the door was shut".

So we have a picture that beyond the door lies relief that the waiting is for ever over. A picture of joy, of friendship, of conviviality, as the bridegroom makes himself known to His bride. And to warn us, to encourage us, not to make us fearful or depressed, the contrasting case of the five foolish virgins is clearly delineated. For them and them only, the door was shut and irrevocably those that had gone forth to meet the bridegroom were shut in or shut out not arbitrarily, but by a God whose longsuffering waits now just as it did in the days of Noah, but who equally with the manifestation of His love and mercy can only approve or disapprove according to His attributes of truth and justice, in so far as the call to meet the bridegroom finds us ready with lamps burning brightly, or unready with lamps merely smouldering or worse still, extinguished.

These words of Jesus are recorded not that our lamps might splutter and falter, but rather that we may so trim our lamps and provide adequate supplies of oil now, that the call to meet our Heavenly Bridegroom when or wherever it may be, shall find us ready to go with him to the marriage.

This is the recurring exhortation. Mathew chapter 24 verse 42, having outlined the signs which we have mentioned reads: "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come." Having spoken of the thief breaking in unexpectedly verse 44 reads: "therefore be ye also ready for in such an hour as ye think not, the Son of Man cometh." And to conclude that parable in Matthew chapter 25 verse 13 we read: "Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh."

Our aim must be then, to be in a state of continual readiness for the Lord's coming because we cannot look ahead, in effect said Jesus for even for one hour. God knows all things; we can only know those things which He has been pleased to reveal. We know what lies ahead for the world. Like Noah faith in that purpose must cause us to be moved with fear. That is, not fearful, but having a deep respect and reverence for the divine requirements; doing like him, just what God has commanded of us. It is to be expected that such a way of life will meet with scorn or ridicule. The world may think that preaching the hope of a living and reigning with Christ on this earth is just about as sensible as building a boat in anticipation of a flood of waters, year after year, which never seems to come. But divine wisdom triumphed over human folly and it will soon be so seen again. Noah built the ark, he pitched it within and without, but he needed his God to shut the door. We specifically read that: "God shut the door". So we each can do our part in faith day by day to ensure that our lamps will be ready to welcome our Lord at whatever hour he may appear, but our salvation will be dependent just as much on divine miracle in the day of judgement.

We tend naturally to get very involved in the truth as it affects our lives today and that is all very necessary as Jesus goes on to show in the succeeding parables. But we may lose sight of the fact that, although privileged to live at a time in God's plan of redemption when the whole fabric of human society is to be turned inside out, we are in effect but a very small minority of those that have in the words of the parable gone forth to meet the bridegroom., Those who can, for example, go back a generation, say 40 years, will be able to recall a considerable number of fellow pilgrims who in the words of the parable, verse 5: "While the bridegroom tarried, all slumbered and slept." If that be so in but a few years of this latter day revival, how many must be sleeping during six millennia awaiting the cry to go out and meet the bridegroom?

Do you feel lonely, depressed, weighed down? Then reflect upon the stupendous miracle to be performed in the earth in the causing to stand again that vast company, comprising both wise and foolish virgins. Then think of the marvel of the Lord expressing such a grand and marvellous fact almost two millennia ahead, in such a story form. Then let your meditations take you a stage further by recalling that although these words of the Lord in these two chapters are all prophetic, most depended for their ultimate realisation in the continued sinlessness of Jesus himself even in the face of the extreme provocation and suffering and eventual crucifixion we have, as he has bidden us, gathered to remember in the emblems on the table.

Then ponder too that he also knew that before he could have those keys of the grave himself, he required that same miracle of his Father, the grave to be unsealed that he might be as we sometimes sing "our life and light". Through his resurrection, thank God, he has become our ark of safety (as Peter informs us) if we have, as Paul says, been "buried with him in baptism" and "risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him (Christ) from the dead."

With the miracle of the resurrection accomplished and the gathering together of the living taken place (whom as we have already mentioned can in comparison be only a very small number) in the words of the parable at the cry of the herald, "all those virgins arose" and their first thought was to trim their lamps.

What thoughts will crowd into the mind as the summons comes to each of us to go out to meet the bridegroom? The wise will ask themselves:

- "Have I done enough for Christ?"
- "Have all my failings been truly repented of?"
- "Will the mercy that I now realise more than ever I sorely need, be granted?"

And then we can think and consider the general conditions of the Judgement:

- "How will the judgement take place?"
- "Will the rebellious be rebellious still?"
- "Will the contemporaries of each generation be together?"

Certainly as the parable shows there will be those who in the face of events will be aware that they finished their probations totally unready. But it will be useless then for them to expect help from those who would have done so much to help them in former days. All that will be of vital moment then shall be "will we be among those ready that will surely be with him for ever?" For all others the door will be firmly shut.

To be ready is with God's help within the reach of every one so mind. First, having revealed unto us His will and purpose, by the Word He has preserved to our day, because of our natural tendency to forget, we each have the necessity of drawing from its pages through daily circumstances that strength to keep faith and hope and love shining brightly in our hearts. Only in such a way shall we be able to have a reserve of oil. Then with that personal strength, as Jesus went on to show in, the parable of the talents we need to be busy in the service of our absent Master. Whilst our Father expects us to make the best use of those blessings and opportunities he has given to us, and will not be pleased at all with indolence, he mercifully has appointed the one tempted in all points like ourselves as our judge, and as the parable clearly shows, will not expect results which he knows to be beyond our capability. It is for each of us for ever to continually assess what has been divinely given to us and ensure that God's work, as far as lies within our power, is ever prospering. We need, however, ever to remember that in totality it is His goods with which we have been entrusted. However much has been committed to us and faithfully traded with, in comparison with the reward to be granted, the only comparison can be between the few present and the future many things.

So our chapter concludes with the king, our dear Lord, to whom has been committed all power and dominion and authority, extending a wonderful welcome to those who have made themselves ready in the way we have briefly considered from the two parables.

Those who have always maintained a reserve of oil for their lamps, those who come what may, are determined to be ready to welcome the bridegroom and who have while they had opportunity, indeed who made opportunities, have worked hard in their Master's business will find approval. Simply expressed it is those who have throughout probation manifested a bright and shining faith and an abundance of profitable work who will be acceptable.

Oh, what a welcome it will be! Just as we know what disappointment a shut door can bring in this life, so no doubt we have experienced something of the joy that an open door brings. Perhaps we have made an arrangement with a fellow pilgrim when up from the country "Yes next time we are passing through we will, God willing, certainly call on you". Later in keeping the promise perhaps we found that the house just was not where we thought it was. Then suddenly lighting on it, to find the door open and our host actually in the garden, is to immediately receive a wonderful welcome.

The future meeting had been planned in one sense, yet the actual time was unknown. But the welcome on arrival was that much the greater. So again we can all think of our own especial welcomes, or if not, we can all enter into the feelings of Jacob who after hearing that Joseph was yet alive, makes the journey to Egypt to see his son before he dies. What a welcome that was! What feelings of relief and joy, followed by an inheritance in the land and all the good things that Joseph with the permission of Pharaoh, was able to provide.

Our future meeting with our dear Lord is as he tells us in those words spoken on the Mount of Olives, is a certainty, but the exact day or hour is mercifully unknown to us.

But as Jesus indicates in our chapter what a welcome of welcomes it will be for those who have proved to be the wise and the industrious in his service. They are

shepherded to His right hand and to each of the approved there will fall from his lips the greatest of welcomes.

Oh what relief! Oh what joy! "Come, come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world". Yes a wonderful acknowledgement by the king that all is of his Father who has been making ready such a glorious inheritance from the very beginning for those who with his help, have made themselves ready. The essential feature of all that preparation, being his work in Christ that we are now once again to recall.

But as we look at the verses at the end of the chapter the welcome continues with Christ himself not only the bridegroom but the king, going on to say why for "the ready" the door to eternal life of happiness has been opened, or in the case of those not ready, shut. We know the words well. Why are they recorded? May we suggest for two reasons at least. First thinking of Jesus himself, as a gracious acknowledgement by Christ in appreciation of what probation has meant for those who, from then on, will be his eternal companions; and secondly as an incentive for us all now.

How encouraging for us all, that although we have no opportunity to see him or care for him, as in our love for him we would like to do, yet he has told us in advance that whatever we do for one another he counts as done for him personally. The contrary, as he went on to say, of course being just as true. **With midnight fast approaching, God's preparations according to his plan known to us being almost complete, there is little time left for us to make ourselves ready in the way these parables of the Lord have again reminded us.**

Within our ecclesias we have in the many meetings arranged, every assistance for supplementing our private reserve of oil. We all have opportunities both in private and ecclesial work, to further our Master's business and ample opportunity to apply our Master's test as to whether in effect our lamps are burning, and will continue to burn brightly. We can test whether we are trading for him or merely for ourselves. In effect we each have to ask ourselves one question:

"Am I so appreciative of the love which caused Christ to die for me that I am prepared to help forward in ways commanded of me, the lives of all those of my brethren and sisters for whom Christ also died?

If that is our mind and we intend to give practical effect to it be the deed ever so small, or ever so humble, then whilst we have to recognise that the door will be shut against some and justly so, we can confidently anticipate that wonderful promised welcome with Christ as it were standing at the door:

**"Come inherit the kingdom prepared for you - enter into the joy of thy Lord"**

(1977, DS)