

***Vigilance* – a sermon by Rev Phil Wootton**

for Remembrance Sunday 8th November, 2020, based on Micah 4: 1-5 & Matthew 25: 1-13

Vigilamus is the motto of RAF Fylingdales, home for three decades of the famous giant golf balls that adorned the Yorkshire Moors. *Vigilamus* - 'We are watching' – was indeed the watchword – watching out during the Cold War against the threat of Soviet nuclear missiles. Today, Fylingdales still looks out, out into space, tracking hundreds of objects outside the atmosphere and identifying any that may prove a threat. We are watching still!

On Remembrance Sunday, we remember those who have been vigilant in time of war – soldiers, sailors, air-crew, support staff and civilians putting their own lives on the line for the sake of others. Wartime requires special vigilance in all different ways. One group, that got special recognition in the Battle of Britain 80th anniversary commemoration this September, provides us with a powerful image of what vigilance can mean. They are the wartime radar operatives, mainly from the Women's Auxiliary Air Force and the Royal Observer Corps. Their role involved listening intently for radar signals, skilfully interpreting their meaning, reporting with fastidious accuracy, and reliably plotting movements of planes, whilst themselves being in harm's way as the radar stations came under attack. They were watching, and many lives were saved as a result.

This year, the language of war has been commandeered to describe the response to epidemic disease. Some of us find this not altogether helpful, as it can sound alarmist, and it can even imply a struggle against a sentient enemy. But such language does have the effect of conveying a real sense of urgency and of the importance of united action. As we move into a new stage of restrictions, are we ready to do our part, both in stopping the spread of the virus and in supporting others who are particularly struggling? Are we watching?

It's with the same urgency (and more) and the same level of jeopardy (and more) that Jesus speaks to his followers. When the moment comes, he asks, will you be ready? When the living God knocks on your door, what state will he find you in? For us, one of the inevitable effects of pandemic is that we are confronted with our own mortality. Although as a rule we're still unwilling to talk about it, we should ask ourselves how ready we are to approach our own deaths? Have we prepared ourselves, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, practically, knowing that it could happen any day? Have we so attended to our relationship with God now that we are confident in enjoying life with him through eternity?

People tell you not to be gloomy, but this is not about doom and gloom. When Jesus talks of the world to come, he tells a story about a wedding. Indeed, the wedding banquet is one of his best pictures of what the future will bring, whether for us it comes at our death or on the moment of Christ's return. It's the biggest party of all time: the question is, are we ready for it? Today's parable suggests not everyone will be! Indeed, some of those who should have a special role to play will not be ready and so will miss out. Now, for weddings in our culture it's considered the bride's prerogative to be late – to make the groom sweat (not to mention annoying the vicar!)

In Jesus' day it seems it was the groom who could get delayed. And in this story, he gets delayed long into the night. What we'd call bridesmaids – 'virgins' here, or attendants – girls who escort the groom into the feast – fall asleep while waiting. That's not a problem for the five who have prepared, who've brought extra oil for their lamps with them. But the other five, the five who have not thought ahead, might as well go home: they've missed the moment. So, be prepared – stay ready – or you'll miss the party. *Vigilamus!*

This is only one section of Jesus' teaching. The next question is, how should we wait? That will be answered over the next two weeks as we hear two further parables: – first the parable of the talents, which challenges us about how we use the resources we are given; and then the parable of the sheep and the goats, asking how we respond to human need – are we ready to see the face of Jesus in the hungry person on the street? I won't say more now: I don't want to spoil the thunder of those preaching over the next two Sundays.

For today, Remembrance Sunday, what seems appropriate, is to follow the dictum: remember war in order to make peace. In fact, be equally vigilant over peace; as vigilant for peace as you would be if you faced immanent attack. Be vigilant in your personal relationships: make peace while you can. Don't let old wounds fester. Diffuse conflict at home and in the workplace as quickly as possible. Right now, we're all really stressed because of Covid itself and because of the restrictions we're under, and the general sense of anxiety and uncertainty. It makes us all more likely to lose our cool. So, recognising that, let's all of us try to be a calming influence.

Then there are the big conflicts of the world. We may not be able to change them, but we can support peace builders in conflict zones. I've talked before about the work of *Musalaha* in working for reconciliation between Israeli Jews and Arab Palestinians. If our own country is more divided as everyone says, then we need to make building relationships our priority. Many in the church have been involved in *Women together in Wolverhampton*, building relationships between Christians and Muslims, church and mosque. I have recently re-joined the Council of Christians and Jews, seeking better to understand Judaism and Jewish communities.

True peace only comes with justice, so let's keep working for a fairer society and global community. Fairtrade, Christian Aid and many others give us a lead here. Our actions may seem small and insignificant, but remember they are all part of a much bigger picture. That big picture is provided through the wonderful poetry of the Prophets Micah and Isaiah who distilled the grand hopes of humanity into a few lines and images: 'They shall beat swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall sit each one under their own vine and their own fig tree, and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.'

As we remember war, let's be vigilant for peace. *Vigilamus*. Let's all be watching.