

**Christ Church
Montpelier, Vermont
Sermon, Year A, 23rd Sunday after Pentecost; Veterans¹
Rev. Stephen A. Reynes, Deacon©**

“Seek ye First the Kingdom of God”²

In the Name and praise of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

Good morning. I will share some reflections with you regarding two of the readings we heard today, from the book of Joshua and from the gospel, and then regarding veterans.

First, to provide some context for the reading from the Book of Joshua in the Hebrew Scriptures, Joshua was Moses’ assistant for the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. The Book of Joshua begins with the Lord telling Joshua that Moses has died, and now he, Joshua, is to lead the Israelites across the Jordan into land that will be theirs, and I the Lord will not forsake you. Today’s reading is what we might call Joshua’s farewell address, at the end of his very long life,³ to all the leaders and tribes of Israel.

Joshua tells the people to serve the Lord “in sincerity and faithfulness” and to put away the gods that your ancestors served. And then Joshua says the words that are on the cover of today’s service bulletin: “Choose this day whom you will serve; as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” Joshua went on to say, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord.”

¹ Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25; Ps. 78:1-7; 1st Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, 4:13-18); Matthew 25:1-13. Hymns include:

- Processional Hymn # 608, *Eternal Father, Strong to Save*;
- Sequence Hymn (just before this sermon) # 711, *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God*;
- Communion Hymn, # 304, *I come with joy to meet my Lord, forgiven, loved and free*, and
- Recessional, # 460, *Alleluia! Sing to Jesus*

² These are the first words of Hymn # 711 of the Hymnal of the Episcopal Church (1986).

³ Joshua died at the age of 110. Joshua 24:29.

These thoughts must have been important to Joshua, or he would not have included them in this message near the end of his life. I have come to realize that Joshua's message still presents important questions for each of us: Who will you serve? Who is your God?

Long ago, I thought that the idea of idolatry was just one of those things from the dustbins of history or crazy superstitions. Like who would worship a golden calf? Yes, gold may be valuable, but to bow down and pray to an inanimate object? Along my slow road to maturity, I came to see that the accumulation of wealth or possessions or power can become the guiding star for some, the most important filter through which they make decisions. By way of illustration, does the person possess money, or does the money possess the person?

About two months ago I was driving my car alone, and I came up behind a large pick-up truck with a Vermont license plate. The rear window of the truck was taken up with a huge image of two assault-style rifles, you know the AR-15 types we keep seeing in the news. They were at 45-degree angles to one another pointing to a human skull. My immediate thought was, "that is idolatry." It struck me as the combined glorification of those weapons and killing people.

I was reminded of that huge prime-space image in the use of the same weapons in the killing of 58 people and injuring of almost 500 people at the Las Vegas country music concert last month, and another 26 killed, many of them children, plus those wounded, *amidst a church service* in a very small town in Texas earlier this month.

At one point this week I wondered why was the American flag at half-mast again? Oh, yes, in remembrance and honor of the victims of the latest mass murder in our country. It seems that our national flag is at half-mast more than it used to be.

Hunting is a traditional activity in Vermont and elsewhere and some people have guns for protection. That is not what I'm talking about. Joshua raised the question of *Who do you serve, who is your God?* Who or what determines our values and decisions?

I submit that the first words of the hymn that we just sang before the Gospel is a good place to start:

“Seek ye first the kingdom of God

And its righteousness”⁴

That brings us to the Gospel reading with the parable of the ten bridesmaids. The five who brought reserve oil for their lamps are called the wise and the five who did not are the foolish. What does it mean?

First, what it does not mean. It does not mean to try to stay awake all the time! Note that both the wise and the foolish got drowsy and fell asleep. I am grateful to God that we all need sleep and rest. And the lesson of the gospel is not to refuse to help people in need.

According to a respected, modern commentary, Jesus is the bridegroom in this parable. The oil can be understood as faith, good works, or spiritual reserves, ready to shine in good times and dark times.⁵ One interpretation is that the five who prepared to meet Jesus cannot give their preparation to someone else because “[b]eing prepared to welcome Christ is an individual matter....”⁶ My difficulty with that interpretation is that people have different gifts and ways, different paths that they have walked, we can share what we have, and that can be a light to others.

⁴ Hymn # 711.

⁵ *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Feasting on the Word*, Yr. A, Vol. 4, Homiletic Perspective, pages 285, 287, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, WJK Press (2011).

⁶ *Id.* at p. 287.

However, as much as we may lull ourselves into the notion that we have all the time in the world to prepare, or to do a certain good thing, to make something right, to apologize, to engage in healing, we don't. We don't know when the time for doing something will run out. There is opportunity, but not endless opportunity. Hence the closed door.

Procrastinating on cleaning the closet or doing something with the pile of papers here, the books there and the jumble in the basement is one thing. I had a grandfather who was born in Spain, Grampa Jose Antonio. I recall his wife Madeleine asking him when he was going to do X or Y? I see him sitting in his comfortable arm chair and responding in Spanish, in an enjoyable spirit and smile on his face, responding: *Pasado manana*, which means the day *after* tomorrow. Yeah, come to think of it, I got a bit of his blood in me.

But procrastinating in our faith, in active discipleship, can be another thing. I quote from this commentary:

Now is the time for active discipleship, and every moment we can sense the ticking of the clock or the closing of doors. The kingdom of heaven summons us to new life, improved commitment, *casting away of false idols*, active waiting in hope, and renewed vigor in faith.⁷

Turning to veterans, may I ask for all those who are veterans of the US military services to raise their hands? Ok, and now all who have a veteran in their family? Thank you.

On Monday of this week, Lynette Combs, Director of the Christ Church choir, asked me, as the preacher for this Sunday, if I had any hymns I would like to have for this service? I am grateful for that outreach. In view of Veterans Day, I requested the opening hymn, *Eternal Father, Strong to Save*. A Google search led to my discovering that hymn, often

⁷ *Id.* at p.289.

called the Navy Hymn, was written by two Anglican clergy in the UK, and that lyrics have also been composed in recognition of soldiers and airmen. I also requested *Seek ye First the Kingdom of God*, as I had an inkling it would fit with my sermon. (I'll admit I also picked *Seek ye First* because I can sing it better than I do on the more complicated ones). I want to acknowledge and thank Lynette and the Christ Church choir for their time, talent, and dedication in contributing so much to the grace that resounds in this place.

Yesterday, November 11th, was Veterans' Day. World War I ended with an armistice signed at 11:00 AM on the 11th day of the eleventh month. In many countries, Armistice Day remembers and honors the many soldiers who died in that war and those who have died in subsequent wars. I have related here before that I happened to be at Gatwick Airport outside London some years ago on that day. It was announced that there would be a chiming of recorded bells at 11:00 AM, followed by two minutes of silence in that Remembrance and honoring. With the sound of the first bell, *everyone* at that busy international airport stopped in their tracks and there was *absolute silence* for that two minutes. That stunning moment was a turning point in my spiritual journey and led to my ordination as a Deacon two years ago.

I was glad to see that our Governor Phil Scott, with members of the Vermont National Guard and others, unveiled and dedicated the Gold Star Families Memorial Monument on Friday at Norwich University in Northfield. The sacrifices are great by those who choose to serve and their families, and sometimes the sacrifice is ultimate. Remembering that the members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard do not make the political decisions, we owe the utmost respect to those who carry that burden.

We owe them respect, yes, and more than respect. Denise Womer leads the Youth and Family Ministry at Christ Church, and as part of that, organized a project that just led to the delivery of Bags of Basics and cards to the Veterans Place in Northfield. The Veterans Place in Northfield provides a place for vets to live who need to regain their sense of pride and purpose. It looked like the Veterans Place was about to close because the VA wasn't going to fund them for this year because of the federal budget, but the Secretary of the VA decided within the last week that they have funding for the next year. I encourage you to go the webpage of the Veterans Place in Northfield.

In closing, and relating back to the thought that each of us can share light from our own paths, there is a thought that has been on my mind and heart lately. Paul, our priest in partnership, regularly expresses his warm and sincere welcome to all who are here for a Sunday service. It's clear he speaks from the heart and the spirit. Sometimes I look around and see those I know, those I recognize but don't know, and others I've not seen or noticed before. No matter, I am uplifted with your presence. The presence of every one of you is a gift, and our spirits are lifted with your presence.

Amen.