

Ten bridesmaids. Something of a rarity these days – especially ten at once, but we’ll ignore that. Five are wise, five foolish. Not stupid, not unintelligent, not two sandwiches short of a picnic. Just foolish, silly, thoughtless. Not even always foolish, but certainly at this moment displaying a serious lack of forethought. Did they each start out separately, so that it was only much later that five of them realised what they had done? Or was there some sort of changing room full of bridesmaids, in which case someone surely said; ‘Oh, maybe I’d better take a bit of spare lamp-oil’ and some of the others said: ‘Don’t be silly, you won’t need that’? Whichever way it was, some people weren’t thinking ahead. And when the problem came to light (so to speak) there was another discussion. The wise bridesmaids refused to give any oil to the others. Not because they were nasty and ungenerous, but because they understood that if they had done, all the lamps would soon have gone out. At least that way the bridegroom got some light as a welcome. (I do wonder where the other bridesmaids were going to be able to buy oil at midnight, but that may be pushing the story too far.)

There are interpretations of this story which focus on keeping faith alight and being ready to meet Jesus whenever he comes, as opposed to losing commitment because it is a long wait. Rather similar to seed sown on stony ground or growing in good soil. But I’ll leave you to work that out yourselves if you want to, because this time I’m going to spend a few minutes thinking about wisdom. This may seem a strange topic for Remembrance Sunday, but let’s see where it goes.

Being wise and being clever are not the same. There’s a fundamental difference. Someone who is clever probably knows a lot, but they aren’t necessarily wise. Knowledge can be acquired individually and in isolation, and stored up. It is useless if not analysed and processed. Wisdom comes from experience. Knowledge is remembering that a tomato is a fruit. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad. Wisdom comes from a combination of trying things for oneself and learning from other people. I love Marmite. When I was about five, I asked my mother if I could have a whole spoonful of Marmite. She said no, I asked why, and she said that it would make my mouth very sore. Not long afterwards, finding myself alone with a spoon and the Marmite pot, I realised that I should have taken her word for it.

We find ourselves in a world today where wisdom is called for. Some exists, together with vast amounts of information, much of which is inaccurate, and many areas in which knowledge is largely lacking. We also have numerous experts and authorities trying to interpret it all and influence our behaviour in one direction or another. Today is an opportunity to remember. We shall shortly read out the names of the men and women of this parish who gave their lives in two world wars. We will remember, even though none of us does, literally, have any memory of any of them. What we are doing with the remembering is developing our wisdom. Wisdom about the cruelty and irrationality of war and the horrors that one group of people can inflict on another set of people. Wisdom about the circumstances of those who fought – their obedience, comradeship and courage. About the acts of courage and bravery that won medals, and the countless more that must have gone unrecognised. Developing our wisdom about the sacrifice they made, and that everyone who puts themselves at risk to serve others may also be making.

We realise that this selflessness is shown by peacemakers and aid workers all over the world. By members of our emergency services. By the paramedics who don’t know if their patient has Covid-19. By the hospital porters, cleaners, cooks and medical technicians who are at the same risk of infection as doctors and nurses. By the bus driver trying to cope with an

overcrowded school bus, the supermarket checkout operator behind a flimsy screen and the delivery driver stretched to the limit by a punishing schedule. By home-helps, social services staff and care-home workers with inadequate protective equipment. By everyone who continues to work for others while fearful for themselves.

Our wisdom is growing in another way too. We are learning to remember and honour those who, though not losing their lives, have been physically or mentally broken by their experiences. People whose former lives have been destroyed, not just for themselves but for their families. That they live on while constrained by the damage that has been done to them, needing continuing care and adjustments, giving up the 'might have been', can be harder for everyone than grieving a death.

Remembrance is about patriotism; service to king or queen and country. But we are wise to extend our remembrance to include everyone who has suffered, and is suffering, in their service to others. And because wisdom is refined and put to work through experience, we have the responsibility, with the help of God and as far as it is within our powers, to ensure that lessons are learned, that mistakes are not repeated, and that selflessness and sacrifice are recognised and honoured wherever and whenever they occur. Let us remember them.