

## Sermon on November 20, 2005 HIW

Text: Matthew 25, 1 – 13

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

*Hark, the glad sound! The saviour comes, the Saviour promised long* – that's what we've just sung in our hymn.

This joyful singing refers back to some of the verses of psalm 24: *Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.*

Expectations and hope, longing and joy – that's what the topic of next Sunday is, the beginning of the season of Advent. All gates and doors shall be lifted up, shall be opened. Nothing remains unrevealed, nobody is excluded.

Light and brightness shall fill our hearts and all the world.

What a complete contrast to today's topic: *And the door was shut*, it was shut in their faces, as was read to us in the text for today's sermon. Five women, virgins, as the bible says, are left on their own with all their disillusioned aspirations, left on their own outside the door. A bitter experience. Behind the door they hear the laughing and the singing of the other five women. How mean! Even banging on the door does not change their situation: *Sir! Sir! Open the door for us. But he replied: I tell you the truth, I do not know you.* Why on earth does the door remain shut? Didn't they make such an effort to reach the wedding banquet

after buying more oil at the oilseller's? It didn't help: They were left outside in the cold and dark, left alone with all their anger and powerlessness.

Standing in front of a door which was shut in one's face – I think we all know what this is like. And those who have been bereaved during this past year or in the years before and who think of their beloved ones today on this special Sunday of remembering the dead, they could tell what it is like to get the door of death shut in your face. You can't open this door again even if you try hard and start banging on it like mad. You are left behind on your own with all your questions which can't be answered any more, you are left behind with all your tears, with all your powerlessness and anger. Why? Why can't I open the door at least a crack in order to get in touch with him or her again! Why did it have to happen? But alas, all questions and all crying remain unanswered.

There are other situations in life which are not as final as death, when we feel as if we are standing in front of a shut door. When we are struck down by a serious illness or by unemployment we see all those who are healthy or employed as if they are celebrating life at a wedding banquet. It seems to be impossible for us to join them. Would they ever let us in? -

Or if it's getting dark around me because I don't get along with the people I live with any more. Then it may happen that I get thrown out or that I myself make a dash for freedom. - Or if I have shiftwork and don't have regular working hours I loose touch with friends who have their weekends off regularly. Some of my energy and my joy in life may disappear in the process. At the same time my longing for participation, for happiness and bright moments is growing. How must they then feel who come from abroad and often find closed doors here in our country or, sometimes in turn, close their doors because of being afraid of getting molested or even attacked?

Standing in the cold and dark, doors being shut in one's face. First it is ten women who are waiting for the bridegroom. How they would love to get out of the cold and dark and to start celebrating. It is a long time, a very long time until he comes. Has he forgotten them? The hours are dragging.

We know this, too. If it is dark around us the hours drag. The night never seems to come to an end. But then, so the story tell us, all of a sudden a tremendous change happens. The clock strikes twelve. This is the hour of midnight, when the night seems to be darkest and a long way away from daylight. Isn't it amazing? It is exactly at this darkest time that a new start begins. You can not coerce this new start.

Rather it comes towards you just like the bridegroom came towards the women. In the midst of deepest darkness there is light all of sudden, new hope, new perspectives, new possibilities to leave the darkness. The door is opening. At this very moment it will be proved how you have prepared yourself during the time of waiting, whether you have prepared yourself wisely or foolishly.

We have come to the pivotal point of our story. The question that interests me is not so much why 5 women were left behind but rather why 5 women were taken into the festive hall. I will try and find out with the help of a short dialogue. Listen, I ask one of them, how was it for you waiting? Why didn't you leave and go looking for the bridegroom. Or why didn't you set off fireworks and start shouting so that the bridegroom might have seen or heard you and had come? - Well, the young woman answers, as a matter of fact, there was a lot of shouting by others over and over again but their shouting was swallowed up by the darkness. Others did set off big fireworks, but what happened? They smouldered and went out. Again and again somebody said: Look, the bridegroom is coming, but it was nobody else but the nightwatchman. That made me think: Don't get irritated, I said to myself. The bridegroom will come. He will come not because of our shouting but because he promised to. All I have to do is wait, wait not on my own but together with

others, wait with a little light so that it can burn for a long time, wait with a supply of patience.

That's what the woman answered. Maybe this is the clue: to be able to wait and to hold on to God's promise that he will come and brighten up the darkness that surrounds me. All that is needed is maybe nothing but waiting with a little light and a supply of patience no matter how sad or restless I am, how embittered or full of despair.

There are people who want to literally force the darkness to come to an end. I have to think of the growing willingness of terminally ill people to put an end to their lives. You have probably heard of the Swiss organisation called "Dignitas", that's dignity, which set up a branch in Germany here in Hannover recently. Their advertisement is: Entrust yourself in Mr. Minelli who will help you to commit suicide. I know that this is a complicated matter. Criticism towards Dignitas is interpreted by some to be an attack on people's free will. But that's not the question, because one thing is for sure: Nobody, not even the church, can prevent somebody from putting an end to their life. And yet the Swiss organisation is on the wrong track. Our president, Herr Köhler, put it in a nutshell when he said that he wishes people to die not through somebody's hand but holding somebody's hand. The response to the desire for a quick and effective death can only be to bring the dying back into our midst again, to

promote palliative medicine and the alleviation of pain, to support the hospice movement and to advertise the so-called Patientenverfügung, a written document in which somebody declares at which point he wishes to do without the support of medical machines to prolong his life. This is an appropriate response and alternative to a lonesome flight to Zurich and ashes scattered anonymously.

As I said, there are some people who can't wait and who want to force the darkness to come to an end, not only with reference to dying.

There are others who may kindle fires by e.g. getting madly involved in various activities in order to suppress the darkness. When they see themselves in the mirror, however, they realise how burnt out they are, how empty it feels inside. This can be compared with someone who turns up the flame of his oil lamp too high. The oil is soon finished, and there are no reserves to fall back on. How foolish!

There are yet others, who set their flame too low. They have too little self-confidence, and all of a sudden their flame goes out.

There are, however, others who do better. They have only a little light but it is always glowing and thus carries them through. It is exactly this what God's promise is: *A bruised*

*reed he will not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out.* [Isaiah 42, 3], that means: Darkness will not remain eternally, new light is about to come even if you don't expect it to happen.

There are situations in life, however, when you somehow do sense quite clearly that God is at work with his light. When somebody stretches out his hand to me after a quarrel it is as if it was God's hand which offers me reconciliation. Or when somebody sits down beside me in order to listen to what is troubling me it is as if God had taken a seat right next to me in order to lighten my burden.

I know of some people who have recently taken up an opportunity to work, a so called 1 euro job. In spite of a lot of justified criticism towards this means of improving the situation of unemployed people they themselves are in most cases relieved that finally they are able to mix with working people again and by doing so start build up their self esteem again. Is it possible to say that God is at work in this and brings new light into darkness?

I also know of couples who after long years of trials and tribulations agreed on seperating. Their relationship had become totally destructive. But after some time they found new partners and were able to start up a new and fulfilling relationship. Was God at work there bringing new light?

Last but not least: Recently something tragic happened to someone who could be called a workoholic. He had a foolish accident while doing sports. As a consequence of this he was not able to go to work for 7 weeks and had to cancel an incredible amount of appointments. It made me think when he told me that he hadn't really asked himself: Why did this happen, but rather: What did this happen for? What have I been doing wrong? Have I been exploiting my body or even putting my marriage at stake? Was it God who gave him a hint in time, so to speak? What does this all mean to us?

Obviously it is important to keep our lamps burning with an adequate amount of oil, not too much, not too little, and to listen to what God wants to tell us.

Life never has to remain the same. There are always new possibilities and new chances. Darkness can be changed into light. We have already been told in our epistle. There will be even a new earth and a new heaven. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain when we go through the door of death. On the contrary. There will be something like a wedding banquet which will be waiting for us to satisfy the hunger of our body and soul forever. It is because of Christ's death and resurrection that this will happen. *The gates of brass before him burst, the iron*



*fetters yield. The Saviour comes, the Saviour promised long.* As a matter of fact: He has already come. That's why even our earthly life has already been immersed in the light of the risen Christ. His light shines even in the darkness of today's Sunday of remembering the dead. They are already celebrating life everlasting in God's festive hall like we will do when God calls us to be with him. It will be joyful laughing and singing which will fill the eternal wedding banquet.

Until then it is important for us to keep hold of the light of Easter and to endure in patience especially when darkness surrounds us. Therefore I would like you to come forward now and receive a little candle which will be lit from the altar light. And though it won't be oil but wax, this little candle is to be a symbol and a sign of God's presence for you in joyful but even more so in sad moments. Let the candle burn at least throughout our next hymn and then take it home with you. May this candle show you your way and now and again turn into a key which opens a shut door.

Amen.

Pastor Michael Klatt