

The Bach Cantata we are about to hear and the Scripture from Matthew's Gospel that has just been read to us are full of deep spiritual meanings.

But before we go there let's begin on a more light-hearted note.

For there is an amusing story about how this Gospel parable about the wise and foolish virgins once caused a future British Prime Minister to be thrown out of a church for laughing too loudly.

The future Prime Minister was David Lloyd George. He was brought up in the Welsh valleys in a family of devout churchgoing Baptists.

One Sunday the local Welsh Baptist preacher was delivering his sermon with his customary HWL – a Welsh word meaning passionate extemporary eloquence.

In the sermon which amused the future Prime Minister the preacher ended his interpretation of the parable in a tremendous crescendo asking his congregation a rhetorical question:

"Now my brethren" he demanded "If you were a guest at that wedding where would you rather be?"

Would you rather be with the five wise virgins in the light?

Or with the 5 foolish virgins in the dark?"

The young Lloyd George, always a ladies man, burst into such uncontrollable laughter, that he had to leave the church!

By contrast when John Sebastian Bach, a dedicated Christian, composed his Cantata around this parable, I'm sure he had more reverent thoughts in mind.

For the Bible reading and the Cantata both take as their theme, the need to be ready, the need to be prepared.

Get up!" As the choir will sing to us in a few moments. "O Wise virgins Wake up! "Make yourselves ready".

We English think of the Dutch as a well prepared nation.

One of my earliest boyhood memories was of the East Coast floods of 1953 when huge swathes of Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk and Lincolnshire were inundated – including the village where we lived – by unexpectedly high tides from the North Sea. And the cry went up in the newspapers "Why weren't we prepared? Like the Dutch!"

All those dykes and dams and canals and land reclamation projects are part of the Dutch reputation for preparedness.

We think of the Dutch as solid, reliable people, rather better at business than the often eccentric and non-commercial Anglo-Saxons of the British Isles. Perhaps there is a touch of envy here. In the 17th century English school boys were taught to recite the verse:

“In matters of commerce, the fault of the Dutch Is giving too little and asking too much”.

Definitely not the sort of people who let their lamps run out of oil.

This church symbolises another solid, reliable ingredient in Anglo- Dutch relations: the continuity of Monarchy.

467 years ago the pious boy King, Edward VI, son of Henry VIII, granted the Royal Charter which founded this Protestant church for the Dutch congregation of London. And the royal links have continued ever since.

When the old original Church on this site was rebuilt after its destruction in the Blitz of World War II, our then Monarch, King George VI expressed his personal wish to have his royal insignia displayed in the new church.

And so it can be seen on the West wall, between the stone carved emblems of Queen Wilhelmina and Queen Juliana of the Netherlands.

That last emblem stirs a happy memory for me because Queen Juliana was my Godmother. That came about because my mother became a close skiing friend in the 1930s of the then Princess Juliana, who was the guest of honour and principal Godparent at my Christening.

She was an extremely good and generous Godmother who never forgot my birthday and whose Christmas present was always the first to arrive under the tree, elaborately wrapped and punctiliously delivered by the Dutch Embassy.

Queen Juliana, now I think about it, was always well prepared! She somehow looks it in the portrait of her hanging downstairs in this church.

But even people as important as Kings and Queens cannot prepare for everything.

Margaret Thatcher who I served with in Parliament for 23 Years used to talk about "Thatcher's first law of politics" which she defined as "In politics the unexpected always occurs".

Indeed her time as Prime Minister she was totally unprepared for the invasion of the Falkland Islands, for the Brighton bombing of her hotel and for other unexpected episodes.

Unwelcome surprises show up not just in politics but in smaller and more personal ways in many people's lives.

In my own life I was totally unprepared as a 21 year old when my father dropped dead from a heart attack aged only 56.

And much later, when I was Cabinet Minister, I was unprepared for the consequences at the peak of my career of making the mistake of telling what at the time seemed to be a small and unimportant lie.

The consequences turned out to be a sequence of shocks which I came to call Defeat, Disgrace, Divorce, Bankruptcy and Jail. A royal flush of disasters by anyone's standards – and I was utterly unprepared for them.

How I wish I had heeded the messages of Jesus's parable in our reading today which are to stay faithful to God, to be prepared and to be ready.

In the secular world, particularly the world of successful people, the spiritual dimension of such teachings seem irrelevant. They can safely be ignored. Why pay attention to God? The rich know how to spread their risks. They can insure against anything can't they?

Perhaps the year of 2016 might dent that arrogance a little.

Remarkably few people on either side of the argument were prepared for Brexit or for the election of President Trump.

And as we look ahead to 2017 maybe we ain't seen nothing yet in terms of unwelcome surprises.

The possibility of electoral victories Geert Wilders and Marie Le Pen are on the cards.

So is the potential break-up of the European Union, preceded by the breakdown of its immigration and monetary policies.

The collapse of the Brexit negotiations could end not in an agreed settlement but in acrimonious return to tariff wars.

Or even a nuclear conflict might start in North Korea or in the Baltic States.

These are no longer fantasies. They could easily turn out to be real. But how many of us are well prepared for them?

Personally I doubt whether these nightmarish scenarios will happen. But that's because I am an optimist.

But so were those foolish virgins in the parable. They had become complacent. They were unprepared for what the Old Testament prophets called the "Day of the Lord" – symbolised here by the arrival of the bridegroom.

Today even most devout Christians who pay lip service in their liturgies to the second coming of Christ, the Parousia, don't really believe it's going to happen. We sing hymns with refrains like:

"Redeem thy misspent time that's past
And live this day as if thy last".

But we don't do it. Because we are creatures of time, we find it difficult to understand the concept of eternity.

We don't like thinking about the hour of our death, let alone what might lie beyond it. We don't prepare ourselves for the inevitable let alone for the unimaginable.

Sometimes a great piece of music such as the Bach Cantata we are about to hear or a powerful reading of scripture can start us thinking.

Maybe we should think about searching for the spiritual world rather than climbing the ladder of the temporal world?

Maybe we should think about moving away from the path of self-centredness and towards the path of God-centredness. We have been warned to be vigilant.

As the last verse in our reading puts it:

"Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour".

In other words "Be prepared".

Jonathan Aitken Sermon 8 January 2017
The Dutch Church, 7 Austin Friars, EC2N 2HA

Reading Matthew 25:1-13

If we don't prepare, the sad words that may one day be ringing in our ears could be "too late", "I don't know you" or "the door is shut".

May today's service in this Dutch church open our hearts and minds to spiritual preparedness?

Amen.