I Will Meet You in the Middle of the Air **Alison Kershaw**

8th November 2026, St Leonard's, Denmark
After Pentecost [32] Year A
Amos 5.18-24, Psalm 70, 1 Thessalonians 4.9-18, Matthew 25.1-13

Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen

The early days of the COVID-19 epidemic and lockdown of 2020 was an anxious time for everyone around the world. Even here in our relatively safe regional town, we were touched by outside events, and unthinkably closed our little church for the first time ever, leaving prayer services and readings to share in the porch for people to collect as they quickly passed through town. In my own family, two relatives in England died in a hospital isolation ward, a cousin made vulnerable by chemotherapy was unable to leave her home, and others lost friends and neighbours. In the midst of all this darkness the ABCs 7.30 Report aired a film of a lone choirboy in the vast empty space of St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne, interspliced with images of a deserted city – rooms of the National Gallery with no-one to view the art, elevators running with no-one on them, silent streets and freeways. The clip is still online.[i] The choirboy was singing Paul Kelly's *Meet me in the Middle of the Air* – which combines lines from Psalm 23 – the Lord is my Shepherd with a refrain based on Paul's vison of the end-time in 1 Thessalonians: *Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall be with the Lord forever.* The first two verses go:

I am your true shepherd
I will lead you there
Beside still waters
Come and meet me in the middle of the air
I will meet you in the middle of the air

I will lay you down
In pastures green and fair
Every soul shall be restored
I will meet them in the middle of the air
Come and meet me in the middle of the air[ii]

These words struck a deep chord, and when we had to postpone a trip to the UK, aside from meeting in the virtual air of family Zoom sessions, I would sometimes go down to the coast and think of my aunts, uncles and cousins and send my prayers into the sky and over the sea – into the middle of the air.

It is also good to hear this passage from Thessalonians in the week after All Souls and All Saints – with its theme of reunion, and the poetic mystery of all souls from all times being *caught up in the clouds together* to meet God in the air. Paul was writing to his beloved community in Thessalonica who faced violent persecution for their faith. He does not dismiss their grief but gives them hope. He seems to expect that Christ would return in their own lifetime. And even though this, and so many other subsequent predictions of a second coming or "the rapture", did not eventuate in a literal way, there is a mysterious and poetic truth to Paul's vision that sweeps us all up.

In this vision, the Lord comes to meet us – to the living the waiting expectant ones, the Lord descends amid the archangels' call and the sound of God's trumpet. But turning to Matthew's Gospel we have the parable of ten bridesmaids who *took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom*. In imagery echoing the prophets and the lover and beloved in the Song of Songs, Christ is referred to as the bridegroom throughout the New Testament, with humanity or the church as the bride - or in this case the bridesmaids, or as wedding guests. It is the task of the bridesmaids to go out to meet and to greet him – to receive him. To meet someone implies that two parties will set out

from different points of the compass and come together at an appointed time and place - often mid-way between. Such meetings involve a journey, and anticipation of the coming together. They can also involve someone being early or late – rushing or waiting as the two make their way to the meeting place. The lamps in the parable are not only to guide the steps of the bridesmaids, but to guide the bridegroom toward them.

And so, the bridesmaids set out in the dark, no doubt with high expectations of the joyful occasion to come, but the bridegroom is delayed. And this is probably where we find ourselves mirrored in the parable. Living as we do in a world where war and conflict is rife, where justice is a struggle, and the bounty of creation is squandered or hoarded, we can well understand that the bridegroom has been delayed – that the wedding banquet for all creatures is on hold. But we still wait – we don't know when or how the kingdom will come, but we live in hope. Indeed, those with lamps full of oil may even experience that the bridegroom is always coming, always arriving – through Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Epiphany and Pentecost, in the seasons of the church and the seasons of our own lives, we might experience the birth, death, resurrection, and return of Christ many times over, and all at once – the presence of Christ is felt, and the absence, and the hope of return. The kingdom is here now - it is also in its way. And with our lamps trimmed and full of spiritual oil, we might also glimpse into deep time – the beginning and end or consummation of all things – but this remain a mystery – as Jesus said, "but of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matt. 24:36)

In the meantime, like the bridesmaids, we wait in the dark with the oil of the spirit in our lamps. We have been waiting so long that we have fallen asleep. And that is ok – we are only human. But some of us have anticipated that the night-watch might be long and have brought extra oil, while those who expected that all would go expeditiously to a preconceived plan, did not.

Finally, the bridegroom approaches and everyone rushes to trim their lamps – only for the foolish to discover they don't have enough oil. They try to borrow from the wise only to be told there will not be enough to go around. The telling of parables in Matthew often has a harsh edge and to top it off the Lord says to the foolish, *I do not know you* and shuts the door to them, denying access to the wedding banquet. This may seem, well, unchristian, but the message of the parable is not to do with fairness or forgiveness but on the readiness of each individual. If we are not ready – we are simply not ready – we can't borrow spiritual light from anyone else. Others may help us and guide us, but ultimately, we need to trim and fill our own lamps.

We are required to go out and to meet the bridegroom - to act as though the kingdom was so very near, even as we work as though it were so very far away. If, as the prophet of social justice Amos describes, we have merely followed religious form in *solemn assemblies* and *burnt offerings* and noisy songs, but not gone out to greet the kingdom with our whole hearts – not done our part to bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth, *to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream*, not honoured the sacred in others and in ourselves, we are just not ready. For the unprepared 'the day of the Lord' is a dark day, not a wedding banquet fill of light and laughter.

The parable speaks not of perfection, for we can all get sleepy, but of willingness to undertake the long journey, to wait with patience, to be gracious towards one another and the earth, and to keep our lamps burning brightly, so we might say with Christ:

Come and meet me in the middle of the air
I will meet you in the middle of the air

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[i] https://www.australianboyschoir.com.au/blog/meet-me-in-the-middle-of-the-air/

[ii] Paul Kelly, *Meet Me in the Middle of the Air* https://www.paulkelly.com.au/lyric/meet-me-in-the-middle-of-the-air/