

The Parable of the Talents – Sunday November 19th, 2017

Well, what a cheerful set of readings that was. To begin with Zephaniah, with his day of ruin and devastation, darkness and gloom. Then St. Paul, warning of doom coming like a thief in the night. ‘When they say, “peace and security”, then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape.’ And just in case anyone thought that gentle Jesus meek and mild is very different, up pops the end of the reading from Matthew: ‘as for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ The omens, I am afraid, are not good for this sermon. The emergency exits are situated at the rear of the church, on the right and left of the building.

There’s going to be a lot of this stuff over the next few weeks as we move into Advent, a lot of weeks where we are left scratching our heads about this kind of language. Do we *really* believe in judgement, in Hell, in God punishing people? Punishing them *forever*? Or is that just contrary to all that Jesus shows us about God. *Father, forgive them*, he prays... even as they hammer in the nails. Does God say no to that prayer?

Those are really key questions, and take way longer than the few minutes I have this morning. So what I propose to do a few Sundays from now – on the evening of Sunday 10th December, in fact – is to have a longer conversation about them, so we can really thrash out properly together what the church teaches about hell and judgement, and what we think. The two may not be the same. So please, put that in your diaries. Sunday 10th December, 7.30pm, the Breakspear Room – tea, wine, cake and hellfire.

This morning though is not about hell. It is, however, to some extent about judgement. The Parable of the Talents, as the story from Matthew is known, is all about judgement. Incidentally, a talent is *not* what we almost invariably mean by the word – a skill or an aptitude, being good at doing something. No, the talent in the story is *money* – about fifteen years wages for the average first century worker. So whether it’s five, two or even one talent each of the people in the story has been given a stonking great amount of money. Given it by their master to see what they’ll make of it. And when he returns, he wants to see what they’ve done. Have they thought big, have they been bold, have they made it *grow*? If so: well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master. If not: outer darkness. Wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Now when Jesus first told this story, it was probably just before he entered Jerusalem for his showdown in the Temple with the leadership of Israel. They were the ones entrusted with great wealth – not money, but the Temple itself, the commandments, the scriptures, the prophets, everything that made Israel rich, made it God's people. What had they done with it? Would they have built the kind of society God wanted, would Israel have become the light to the nations God wanted, the place where you could look and see the hungry fed, the sick cared for, the weak protected, the stranger welcomed? Well, now it was time to declare. The master was coming. Jesus was walking towards Jerusalem to ask how they had done.

The early church kept the story because fairly obviously, it also applies to us. We have also been given something stupendous, something infinitely more precious and wonderful than all the gold and silver in the world. We've been given, first, life itself – the chance to grow and experience and enjoy. And then, we've been given all that Jesus made real on the Cross. We have been given the way to become one with the awesome power of goodness at the heart of everything, with the One whom Jesus called his Father. We've been put in touch with a God who will forgive our sins, bind up our wounds, and make us full of love. We've been shown that we are on the way to glory: that our lives do not end in sickness and decay and nothingness, but in an astounding burst of resurrection joy. We've been given *treasure*. And the question to us, at our end, will be as it was to the priests: so what did you do with it?

How should we get ready to answer that question? At one level, it is blissfully simple, at another very hard work. The blissfully simple bit first. What God wants is very, very straightforward. Each one of us is called to do just two things. As Jesus put it when someone asked him what the most important commandment was, it's very simple: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself. If you want to stand with confidence when he asks you the question on judgement day, start organising your life as if those two things *are* really the most important. Let them be the twin stars around which everything else moves, the deepest desire in which all other desires must find their place.

So what might that simplicity look like in practice? This is where the hard work begins. Only you can say in detail what it means in your life – one of the things about God is that He genuinely does rejoice in difference, he doesn't want clones. What *your* love of God and neighbour looks like might not be exactly what *mine* looks like, and that's fine.

But we can say some basics. Number one, if love of God and neighbour is the central, driving point of our life, then other things must not be. That's going to require some stiff honesty about ourselves – from ourselves, and if we're brave enough to hear it, from other people. We all think we can see in others what's really driving them: the love of money, the love of power, of achievement, of sexual gratification, of status, of good times, of safety. Not all those things are bad: but they are if they become the point. They are if we place them at the centre of our lives, if all things must give way to them. That's what the Bible calls idolatry, and it ends in disaster. So basic number one is that the kind of life God wants is going to have said 'no', pretty firmly and clearly, to some other drives. Think about it. What has being a Christian involved you having to say 'no' to? If the answer is *nothing*, then either you are very, very good – or that's a bit of a worry, and you've never fully realised what's actually driving you.

Number two. If love of God and neighbour is the central driving force of life, then this will not be a matter of mere words. Anybody can say the words. No, the way to know if you really mean this – for most of us, at any rate – is to with very concrete things. Time, money, and care. Time, money, and care. How much of them do I give each day, each week, to loving God and my neighbour? How much time do I spend in prayer, or in being there for the needy? How much money do I give to the church and to the poor? And in that time, and in that money, is my heart there too? Do I care about what happens – in my prayers, in the church, in the service of the poor? Do I do all that I can to make it better?

Blissfully simple, and blooming hard work. That's what being a Christian is all about. It's what being a human being is all about. And in the end, that's what God will ask us. Let's be ready for his question.