

Sermon for St Thomas, Port Macquarie 15 November 2020

1 Thess 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

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When I was living in the UK and working as a Vicar in the Church of England, I was filling in for a priest who was on leave. One of his churches was a medieval church overlooking the sea on the East Yorkshire coast. As I approached the church I noticed that the bell tower was made from a completely different stone than the rest of the church. This was not unusual because it was quite common for buildings to be built in stages, as money came available (may have been the case with this one, certainly the case in Grafton): such as the chancel first, then the nave a century or two later, and then the tower last of all. But in these cases the stone was usually from the same local or regional quarry, simply differently weathered according to its age.

But in this case the stone was a completely different type of stone. On enquiring, I was told that they had always wanted a tower but could never afford it, until one night there was a shipwreck on the beach just below the church. The ship was carrying a huge load of stone for a church further up the coast.

That stone was never officially recovered from the wreck; it mysteriously disappeared. A year or so later the new church tower appeared.

Towards the end of Matthew's Gospel there's a string of parables about being ready.

They follow a passage in which Jesus speaks about the Last Judgement. The Parable of the Bridesmaids (or 10 Virgins), which we had last

Sunday, is a good example of the need for readiness in the light of the coming Kingdom.

Today's Parable of the Talents is also part of this set.

The wealthy ruler is going on a journey and puts three of his trusted servants in charge of parts of his property. The master goes away leaving them to trade. The first two double their money, but the last, who is afraid, buries the treasure.

On his return, the master asks for an account of how they have handled his funds (ie their stewardship). The first two are rewarded, but the third punished.

I must admit, this isn't one of my favourite parables. It's one that I'm often uncomfortable with. Firstly, on the surface, it seems to be about money (it does speak straightforwardly and unashamedly about handling money, about the economy and finance). My discomfort with it also relates to the fact that the servants who make the most money get rewarded and the scared one gets punished. It doesn't sit easily with me, probably because I can relate to the third servant more than the first two: I'm no investor and in the same situation I can imagine myself just hiding the money away too in safe keeping for the master's return.

Yet the intention of the parable, set as it is in this section about being prepared for the Kingdom, is not really about personal wealth.

In this section of Matthew's Gospel the clear message is that we are to live in expectation of the return of Christ.

In doing so, we are to trust God, we are to use the gifts that he has given us (not hide them away), but use them for the wider good of all; and be prepared to give an account of our lives, with nothing wasted. Rich or poor, blessed with abundant gifts and abilities or not, what have we done with our lives?

Do we treat our gifts as our own and hide them away?

Or do we see them as responsibilities to the wider community, to be used and developed for the good of all?

So there's a contrast - between the use of our gifts for the wider good (on the one hand) and, on the other, hiding them away & keeping them to ourselves. This contrast is reflected in the differences between the 3rd servant and the first two:

The first two servants know their master, are passionate in his service. The master speaks of his joy in them, and rewards their commitment. They show courage, creativity and aspiration. The result was the joyous pleasure of their master.

In contrast, the third servant is unaware of the master's true nature, is not passionate in his master's service.

Archbishop Justin Welby says that the third servant is "fearful when he should be brave, and foolish when he should be wise".

He is interested in preserving his own safety, is blissfully unaware of his responsibility to the wider good, and is not grateful for the gifts he has been given.

So we have in this parable a model for our stewardship, of our Christian service and passion for God and his Kingdom.

We would all do well to imitate the first two servants in their taking of responsibility and in their passion to please the master.

To (our Confirmation candidates today) today is evidence that you have already begun to live this way:

Having undertaken a course of study about what it means to be a mature Christian, you have begun to understand God and grow closer to God – to know his true nature.

In making this public commitment today, you are committing to serve him, pleasing him in all things, not to live for yourselves, but in gratitude to live for others in his service.

So as we approach the season of Advent and we explore these parables towards the end of Matthew’s Gospel about being prepared for the Kingdom, we all need to ask ourselves:

What are my gifts?

Am I grateful for these gifts I have been given?

Am I taking mature Christian responsibility to use my gifts for the wider good of others?

Do I really know and understand God’s nature?

Am I passionate for the things that he is passionate about?

Am I committing myself to work for those things?

Jesus seeks a response that is outwardly looking, courageous and generous. I pray that we may open ourselves to the Holy Spirit who will empower this response in us.

Everliving God, before the earth was formed and even after it shall cease to be, you are God. Break into our short span of life and show us those things that are eternal, that we may serve your purpose in all we do; Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.