Second Sunday before Advent

Zephaniah and Matthew’s parable of the talents

Postscript to Zephaniah reading

This is uncomfortable stuff isn’t it? We imagine that we don’t fancy any judgement, no dark destiny, no gnashing of teeth or punishment. But how then do we cope with the many terrible deeds done, even today? We do want God to end suffering, to protect the innocent and rescue the downtrodden! Sin needs to be ended, which means judgement, justice and restitution. So there must be a day of reckoning—but look carefully at these words: the day of darkness and suffering describes the events of Good Friday. God has taken that judgement upon himself—the cross is both judgement and mercy. It declares an end to the domination of sin, and opens the floodgates of mercy. Watch out for this day of judgment again in our gospel reading, where the consequences of turning away from God must be faced.

Talk

The parable of the talents is a familiar one which many of us will have taken to heart at one time or another. Just to reassure you—it is not an allegory, and the master in the story is clearly not intended to directly represent God!  It is instead a story like all parables to make us think, to get under our skins. It is a story about the kingdom of God, so we should ask ourselves just what it tells us about the kingdom of God. But before we begin, a moment of personal reflection. Ask yourself, what does this parable mean to you? What’s your gut reaction? Do you hear it as a call to radical discipleship? Or do you hear it more as a moral tale of putting in the hours and working hard at whatever God sets us to?

For me, it is a bit of a millstone—I grew up very aware that I was privileged beyond most people, both in terms of income and expectations. I was brought up in a Christian home and I never had to hide my faith. And for all these benefits, I felt that the parable of the talents was demanding that I return God’s investment 10 fold. I clearly had to be using all the gifts that God had given me or I was letting him down. The words ‘You worthless lazy servant’ haunted me. I share this because maybe you have inherited a distorted version too. This is not what God says to any of us, and it is not the true meaning of the parable!

So what is it really about? We should be alerted to its central meaning by the amounts mentioned. A talent was worth fifteen years wages for the ordinary man—a staggering amount of money to be casually given. This is not just a story of a test of productivity –it is a story of trust on a dramatic scale. Imagine being offered that sort of money, even if it is a loan! Two of the men see this as an incredible opportunity, a life changing chance to make a fortune! They use the money to run businesses and doubled the amounts given, and no doubt they lived on the proceeds even while their capital grew. When their master returns they can return the money doubled in value, and they are suitably rewarded.

The third man however was too scared to do anything with this money—and he might have received less but it was still a dramatic amount. He wasn’t going to use it in any shape or form! He just buried it in the ground, put it safely out of the way so that it was hidden from any one else.  He had a very different take on life—he saw his master as  demanding and unfair, reaping where he has not sown, gathering where he has not scattered. He does not receive the money as a gesture of amazing trust but as a trap for the unwary. He is determined not to take any risks, not even investing the money in the bank. He is resentful and inward looking, not wanting to be blessed or seen as blessed.

So which of these men experienced the kingdom of God?

The master does not return for many years —what has it been like for those men while he has been away? If the story is true to life, then it won’t have been easy all the way. The men that invested in businesses will surely have had ups and downs. But they were enabled to take risks, with that huge sum of money behind them. Think of the micro loans made by charities for a family in poverty to buy a cow. The cow eats grass and plants already growing, and produces milk. Milk is one of the easiest ways to lift a family out of malnutrition, and the cow fertilises the field into the bargain so that crops can be grown. Once the cow has produced a calf, the family has a little insurance against hard times, or they can sell the calf to pay for school fees or medical bills. A very modest loan changes everything. In England of course a bigger loan can enable you to make critical changes like buying a car so you can travel for a better job, or investing in equipment to become self employed. It is not essential to take frightening risks—the people in the parable were not playing the stock exchange or gambling! So the contrast with the man who buried his money becomes more stark. He didn’t want to change, or stick his neck out in any kind of way. He didn’t really receive that gift at all—he parked it somewhere he didn’t have to think about it, and returned it with resentment.

The consequences were severe. He had been given the chance to experience the kingdom of God, and he said no. In fact he did worse than say no—he portrayed the gift as a trap, and the master as a grasping cheat. In doing so, he shut himself out of the opportunities offered. I think he already lived in the dark, where there is gnashing of teeth, even before he was thrown out of the master’s house. He brought judgement on himself, not so much by what he did, but by his determination not to receive or trust.

So how does that speak to us? If we read the parable as a moral tale encouraging us to work harder for God, or demanding that we return a good investment for what God has given us, we make God out as a hard taskmaster and burden ourselves with guilt. But if we see the extraordinary trust and opportunity that the Kingdom of God offers, are we not liberated?

Right now, of course, you may be feeling as though God has not given you anything very much. The coronavirus has taken away many of the opportunities and you may very well be feeling that you have an uncertain financial future. Our country overall certainly does! But go back to the basics: we are alive, we can wake in the morning and breath deep of a new day. We have our senses to experience all that is good, and our freedom to make our own choices—all purely gifts from God, nothing we are entitled to or deserve. Here God has set us in an essentially prosperous country at peace, with a free health service and education system. In our own little patch of Shropshire we are surrounded by natural beauty—we can all enjoy the autumn colours and soft sunshine through mist. We are in communities which are safe and caring, with neighbours who will stop and talk. Even if we are cut off from family and friends we have access to the telephone and often the computer. Now that’s not to say that we are supposed to be happy and cheerful all the time. This pandemic has been hard on us all, but living in the kingdom of heaven requires us first of all to know that we are blessed by God’s incredible generosity. If we begin by praising him for all that he has given us, we receive his gifts and enjoy them—then we cannot be people who have nothing, like the third man of the parable. To everyone who has will be given more, says Jesus. Maybe not physical material things, but joy, hope and love? We know that these are things that multiply!

The challenge of the parable of the talents is to go out and live the opportunities of God’s gifts to us. Firstly, we are to enjoy them, but then to multiply them so that others can share in God’s goodness. Investing in God’s kingdom can be as simple as cooking someone a delicious meal—or as demanding as working long hours in a caring role with little or no financial reward. We are all invited to invest what God gives us—and at the moment it might just be in picking up the phone each day, listening to someone who is lonely, or giving regularly to a charity and praying through their literature, or engaging with the news in God’s presence. The example of the man who buried his gold warns us against retreating from the world, fearfully turning away from God’s goodness and refusing to share any of if.

This parable above all speaks to us of God’s gift of Jesus—his incredible investment in our world, not holding anything back. He floods the world with redeeming love, transforming our lives. How we react depends on whether we can trust Jesus, whether we can know that we are trusted and redeemed ourselves. We can choose to live in outer darkness, determined to see life as a dangerous trap—and indeed all of us will spend some time in that darkness! But we can also choose to believe that we are loved and forgiven, precious children of God. In that place of security we can take risks. We can give away more than we are comfortable with, we can reach out even though we might be rejected, we can share in the world’s pain even when it seems overwhelming. We can continue to love when we have run out of our own resources, go on looking for God’s image in our enemies, reach out of our own safe zone to engage with what God is doing in the lives of strangers.

We do not worship a hard taskmaster who is constantly measuring us up and finding us wanting. It is not God who always wants more than we can give, always demands more and harder work from us. God is the overwhelmingly generous God of love, who equips us to face whatever challenges life throws at us, not just with the bare minimum but with the boundless resource of his love. We are invited to live out his generosity in abundant gladness.