

Sermon: *Second Sunday before Advent 2017 (19'11'17)*

[Matthew 25: 14-30; Zephaniah 1: 7, 12-end; 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11]

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May I speak in the name of the one true God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen †

Part 1:

This time last year, I wanted to develop a new interest (something completely different), and I fancied the idea of pottery. My cousin's wife was rather scornful when I mentioned this - '*sounds a bit dull*'. But, encouraged by my children, I signed up for a weekly session with a local potter – and now I'm completely *hooked*. Recently, my cousin and his wife came to stay, and when she noticed my pots and bowls she exclaimed – “Wow, Mike – I didn't know you had it in you, you're a man of hidden talents!”.

I suspect that every one of us has 'hidden talents'.

Part 2:

The use of the word '*talents*' to mean abilities we may have, and which may lie hidden (an unrealised potential), originates with the *parable* we've just heard in our Gospel reading. There, '*talent*' literally means a sum of money - a very *valuable* sum, 1 talent was as much a labourer could earn in 15 years. Let's think about this parable:

- Their 'master' *entrusts* each servant with something hugely *valuable* – something that belongs to *him* rather than the servant.
- Notice, he doesn't give them all the *same*; he takes account of each person's *ability* – some are entrusted with more.
- But the *key* point is that he doesn't expect them just to *sit on* the talents they're entrusted with – he expects that they'll put them to good *use*.

Jesus' parables are stories he told to convey a *spiritual meaning*. Most are about the '*kingdom of God*', sometimes symbolised as a great 'feast'. A feast is an occasion for *rejoicing* of course, and in this parable Jesus tells us that the servants who put their talents to good use were invited to '*enter into the joy of their master*' - which conveys the same idea.

Our parable makes it clear that this master *entrusted* something of enormous *value* to his servants, and that he expected each of them to put it to good use in order to *produce* something that the master himself *valued*. So what *is* it that *God* values - just what might his '*Kingdom*' entail?

The Bible makes it clear that God values the *healthy growth* and flourishing of his people and of the *whole* of his Creation, in ways that reflect his *own love*. Remember how Jesus answered when asked what the greatest Commandment is – “*love God with all your heart, and love others as you love yourself*”.

That implies that each of us is expected *not to hide* any ‘talents’ we have been blessed with, but to put them to *use* in ways that reflect *God’s own values* – ways that express the *love* of God, and *our* love for others. And it’s just *possible* that, in doing this, *we* might *enable others* to develop (or release) *their* own talents in ways that they might not otherwise have done. That brings to mind another parable, where Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to ‘a mustard seed’ – a *tiny* seed, but one which gives rise to a *shrub* so huge that birds can nest in it.

[Part 3:](#)

Many of Jesus’ parables *also* seem to mention a great *division* that will take place between the people who *enter* God’s kingdom and those who are *shut out* – left in ‘darkness’ like the servant in today’s parable who simply *buried* the talent entrusted to him. There’s clearly a *warning* here. In fact, one of the themes running through all three of today’s readings concerns a warning about *judgement*.

The prophet Zechariah lived 600 years before Jesus, when many of his people were turning away from God, putting their trust in *idols* – *false* gods of their own making. Zechariah warns that they’re going to bring disaster on themselves and their nation, and neither their silver nor gold will save them from the consequences of failing to live by God’s values. (25 years later the Babylonian Empire invaded, destroyed Jerusalem, and carried its people into Exile for a whole generation.)

We might pause to reflect how far Zechariah’s warning might be applicable in *our* time, as *we* worship the idols of *consumerism*. Think of the impact of our selfish plundering of the earth’s resources to support an unsustainable pattern of life which is damaging the world’s weather patterns, which contributes to the suffering of a large part of the world’s population, and which threatens many of God’s creatures with extinction.

As *Advent* approaches, it’s worth reminding ourselves that it isn’t simply the lead-up to the birth of Jesus (Christmas); it’s *also* the time when Christians look to the *return* of Jesus – not as a helpless baby, or a dying figure on the cross, but this time as *King* and *Judge*. Remember the words of the *Creed* which we say each Sunday: “*he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end*”.

The way theologians have *interpreted* this theme of 'judgement' varies, but what is *clear* is that:

- it's an important *issue* for the Gospel writers, for St. Paul, and for Jesus himself – so we can't just ignore it;
- Jesus looked towards a *future 'coming'*, when the present world order would be completely replaced by a new state of affairs.

There's a strong emphasis on the theme of '*judgement*' associated with Jesus' eventual *return*. This is echoed in our Parable, where the message seems to be that, when Jesus returns, there will be an *accounting* of what each of us has *done* with the various '*talents*' that God has endowed us with - how far have we put them to good *use*?

What's more, Jesus makes it clear that this will happen at a *time* when people *aren't expecting* it – so he urges his followers to be *ready* at all times. We might do well to remember that Scout motto: '*Be Prepared*'!

Part 4:

All this sounds a bit worrying. But Paul tells us that those who put their faith in *Jesus* have nothing to fear.

It's worth thinking about that slave who *buried* his talent. He buries it where it will be *safe* but *unfruitful*. What the other servants treat as an *opportunity*, he treats as a symbol of his *fear* about an *angry* master who will want a full account when he returns. He has misunderstood the *trust* placed in him by his master.

This is evident when the talent that he's hidden is *given* to the servant who doubled *his* 5 talents by putting them to good *use*. The master *wasn't* giving his wealth to his servants so that *he* could get it back for *himself* with interest, but so that *they* could *make* something of it. God places *his* trust in each of us (i.e. endows us each with different '*talents*'/strengths, however modest) NOT to *catch us out*, but because he wants to *give* us the *opportunity* to *flourish* and to contribute to the development of his Kingdom.

Part 5 – Conclusion:

The Kingdom of God isn't just some *future* event - it's already got *underway* with the birth of Jesus. His birth, his life, his teaching, his example, his wholly undeserved death on our behalf, and his physical resurrection, confirm that death is not the end.

So, the Kingdom of God is happening *now*. And *we're* invited to the feast - invited to play our part by making available whatever talents our Master has endowed with for his *use*. We are *all* people of 'hidden talents'. These may take the form of *skills* - even quite simple ones such as the ability to *listen*, or of *resources*, or of *time* (who knows what some simple act of patient kindness or generosity of spirit on our part may ultimately lead to?). And the *message* is that we're called upon to make these *available*, to put them to *use* in the service of the 'Kingdom of God'.

When we do this, we may come to realise that we're sharing in something wonderful, a cause for joy. If we insist on *burying* our talents, though, we shall *cut ourselves off* from that joyful participation – like being shut out of a feast.

But (and there is a 'but' to hold in mind), as Martin Luther emphasised 500 years ago, we can never hope to '*justify*' ourselves before God through the things we do. We're only human(!) - we're bound to fall short at times; however hard we try, we shall *never* wholly *succeed* in showing other people (or showing God himself) the *love* that he showed.

And that's all right - God understands. As the Psalm says 'he knows how we are made' - that's the point. Ultimately, we are 'saved' by our *faith* in God's *love*, rather than by our *deeds* alone. This is a basic truth of Scripture that's recognised today by both the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches alike.

As we've just heard in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians: "*God has destined us not for his anger, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus, who died for us*". For those of us who entrust ourselves to God in *faith*, the message is one of *hope* rather than despair.

And if we *have* true faith in Jesus (recognising the depth of *his* love), *we* in turn are certain to be moved to *express* this love in the way we *live* our lives, in the way *we* act towards people - especially people from whom we've no reason to expect anything in return.

Amen †