

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 33 Year A 2017

What were some of the sayings, the little proverbs your parents taught you? Every culture has a collection of wise sayings that offers advice about how to live your life, and we have ours: *Two wrongs don't make a right; the pen is mightier than the sword; no man is an island; hope for the best and prepare for the worst; a picture is worth a thousand words; good things come to those who wait; actions speak louder than words.* I could go on and on. And I'm sure you would have your favourites that you could add as well! We even get a few well-known sayings from the Bible! It is one of the lasting legacies of the King James or the Authorized Version of the Bible. The form and cadences in that classic English translation so often had a memorable, poetic quality: *he who lives by the sword shall die by the sword, don't hide you light under a bushel; do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

We come to the long-ish and somewhat perplexing parable we encounter today, and we might well wonder what to make of it all. Especially - as what is now familiar to us from the gospel readings these past weeks - these unsettling endings. I would suggest one little proverb - one small phrase - to help us make sense of it: *if you don't use it, you'll lose it!*

As it is told us today, a man who is about to leave on a journey entrusts his servants with different portions of his property. They are to look after that property and to ensure that it continues to work for the master, that it continues to make a profit while he is away. So, two of the servants double the investment they are entrusted with, and are richly rewarded for doing so; but the third gains nothing from it for his master, all he does is keep what he is given safe - following the custom of the time of burying the money (the equivalent of keeping the Milo tin under the bed) so that no harm might come to it. The result for him? What was entrusted to him is taken and given to the servant with already a lot, and he is cast out from his master.

As I've said before, it is always good to see how a particular story fits into the bigger picture of a particular Gospel. It reminds us that the gospel writers were not simply sewing together a lot of haphazard incidental and unrelated stories. No. There is a very careful craft in the way each of the gospel writers approach their work. And we see it again here. The parable today is placed alongside several other stories in chapters 24 and 25 about the end of time. And so, we have a string of stories which relate the coming of the master to his rightful estate; of the groom to his bride; of the king to his throne. They all serve as cautionary tales: be vigilant, be prepared; do well with what has been entrusted to you. And if you're not, well, we hear of evil servants being cut to pieces and assigned a place with the hypocrites; and of careless maidens being denied their spots at the wedding feast; and - such as we hear today - of being turfed out to where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth...

As in all these stories there is this overarching theme of judgment. We tend to be pretty nervous when we hear that. It's not something we necessarily like to acknowledge as an article of faith. God's supposed to be all merciful and all loving. So, we ignore or neglect the flip side of that: that God is also the God of righteousness and justice, and so of judgement.

As we saw last week with the foolish bridesmaids, complacency is one of the real traps of the spiritual life. And so, a notion of judgment ought to keep us a little on edge, ought to make us more mindful that the joys and blessing of faith don't work like automatic magic. In the frank message of the parable: if you don't use it, you'll lose it!

We need to think of ourselves - our church - as a servant entrusted with fabulous wealth: wealth to look after, as we do the Master's work in his absence, awaiting his return. God *has* given us a fabulous a treasure. But he has left what we do with it up to us. It reflects of course, one of the great theological truths: that because God loves us, we *are free* to do as we will with that gift of love. It means we can chose life and truth. Or we can choose to mess things up, and do nothing with what we are given. God has gifted this church. So, what are we going to do with that? Are we going to play it safe? Or are we going to risk it?

After mass today, we hold our Annual General Meeting. And rather than just a mere functional process, it is an opportunity to consider our life together and to give thanks for all we have achieved this past year. But it is also an opportunity to examine what has God gifted us with and ask of ourselves, *what are going to do with that?* I don't think we consider that enough. Too often we approach the life of faith with an attitude, *what can I get out of it?* We expect our church to be here, we expect nice services and the roof not to leak. Too often we approach faith and our life in the church as consumerists, not Christians. We're quite happy to take of the benefits that come from faith; more reluctant to give. The call of the gospel though is that we take seriously what God has given us (and continues to give us), and to commit to sharing that and growing that. Approaching our church as a *consumer* is a real issue and no way to grow faith.

The issue is of keeping personal responsibility at arm's length. It's the same dynamic at play in the gospel today. But what keeps the third servant at this arm's length, though, is fear. He's either feared his master too much, or not enough! Like the man who is afraid to love - because he might get hurt. Like the woman who is afraid to reach out - because she might be rejected. Like the child who is afraid to walk - because he might fall down. Our hearts shrivel up for not being open to others and the world. Our muscles weaken because they are not used. *If you don't use it, you'll lose it...* The third servant was afraid; and as in the case of almost all fears, his fear came true.

But fear *really isn't* the attitude that should mark our lives as Christians! The message seen whenever God visits his people is, "be not afraid". Trust God. Trust in the one who said, *"those who seek to save their lives will lose it, but those who give their lives for me and for the gospel, will save it."* The sin of the third servant of not daring to risk; it was the sin of not believing that his master would reward those who trust in him. The mystery and beauty and truth of the Gospel is not entrusted to the Church to be buried in the ground. If we don't use it - the warning is real - we'll lose it! So, my brothers and sisters, be not afraid to be generous in what God gives us. Amen.