

19<sup>th</sup> November 2023

Talents & Timing

1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

Matthew 25.14-30

Medstead 10am

*Come Holy Spirit, what we know not teach us, what we have not grant us, and what we are not make us for your love's sake. Amen.*

A leading theologian describes today's parable as being '*as problematic as any passage in the Gospel.*' So thank you for the invitation to preach today! Next Sunday we have Matthew's passage on 'Sheep and Goats', last week the '10 Bridesmaids', but the parable of the Talents is obscure.

Note, for example, it appears in both Matthew and Luke but with significant differences (probably due to being part of oral tradition which has changed). Note the Master is tricky to equate with God as we're told he is a harsh and unscrupulous man. And note that differences in the two versions are often not just down to changes in emphasis and details, but also additions which potentially change the whole meaning, such as Matthew's summary in verse 29, '*For to all those who have, more will be given... but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.*'

So where do we go with all this, this morning?

Well I would like to focus a little on timing.

In the parable we are told of a master going on a journey and returning '*after a long time*'. The 1 Thessalonians passage was all about '*the times and the seasons*' and being alert to the Lord's sudden coming – not unlike the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids in the immediate preceding passage in Matthew.

In both cases there is a sort of sense of the Ofsted inspection. All of you who are or have been involved with schools will know the dread of not knowing the day of the Ofsted

inspection and that frequent sense of constant anxiety, trying to be prepared. And the anxiousness of coming judgement.

With the arrival of the Covid Pandemic the daily lives of nearly all of us were thrown out of all our usual routines and patterns. Before the invention of the inoculations there was serious fear of illness and death for many, with that extraordinary attention we gave to not being near other people; so inhuman to distance ourselves, even from many loved ones. During the Pandemic I remember being struck by an article which pointed out that for many of the post war generation in the West, this was the first time our lives had seriously been interrupted. We have lived through a period of constancy and certainties which no previous generation had experienced; and we took it for granted.

As we look at war in Europe and the Middle East, climate related disasters across many parts of our world, and all that forces hundreds of thousands of our fellow human beings to leave all they know as home and seek security of living elsewhere; so we are reminded second hand of the uncertainty of the times many live with constantly.

But then, for many individuals and families we have experienced sudden disruption of much we have taken for granted. Not 'judgement' perhaps, but sickness, financial crisis, the break up of precious relationships or the death of someone deeply loved. Such times can come '*like a thief in the night*' and our world can be turned upside down.

Some of these times we learn the lessons and move on in life wiser. Other times can be much, much harder. Perhaps the sudden death of a loved one when our last words to them were harsh or less than expressing the love we felt. The breakdown of a relationship caused by the foolish actions of one party where the persistent regret or hurt gnaws away at our soul. So what might our readings have to offer in all this?

Well at one level we can read the parable of the talents as just that. A parable reminding us to make the most of the God given talents we have. Understanding that neglecting them affects

us perhaps more than others; whereas making the most of them will bring us and others abundance in all kinds of good ways.

But I think there is something more, especially from our first reading, which the issue of timing highlights. You no doubt have heard the saying:

*Live every day of your life as if it was your last...  
... and one day you'll be right.*

It's not an invitation to constant party season, but an encouragement to focus on what truly matters; valuing each friendship and relationship and not taking them for granted; caring for our neighbour; knowing the joy in giving and living an outward life, not preoccupied with self.

The Christian tradition that helps us here is that of virtue ethics. This is the brief philosophical passage in the sermon which I hope resonates with you rather than bores you! Virtue ethics is based on the idea of a good life. That is, that we seek to live a life based on certain core values which we habitually practice with such consistency that they become virtues, which form our character, so that in any given situation we don't have to think 'Well what might be the right thing to do this time?' but act out of a deeply ingrained sense of what is right. [Philosophical passage over!]

I think this is partly the implication of what Thessalonians is saying in verses 4 & 5

*But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day.*

In times of the unexpected death of a loved one, whilst perhaps troubled by not having had the chance to say everything we wanted to say; so often the truth is that they will know how we truly felt about them by the love shared throughout our relationship; in fact a death bed speech is not going to make up for a lifetime of neglect, but a lifetime of love is deeply ingrained and known.

I don't want to be political this morning, but perhaps to comment - without intending this as a particular comment on events of the past week or even recent years - that it seems to me that one of the current deficits in our country is of sufficient political leaders – and indeed of other leaders and influencers in society – living with the standards and degrees of integrity in speech and actions, to inspire others in standards of public life which we would want to celebrate.

As we draw towards the end of this Christian year so we have kept a season of remembrance: remembering those who died in conflicts, fighting for freedoms we enjoy; remembering the saints and martyrs who have gone before us, holding up standards of what holiness or life lived dedicated to the ways of God can look like; remembering the souls of the departed – our loved ones now living in the fullness of God's love – and how the good in their lives can inspire our living.

So the timing of the season changes; Advent and a new Christian year beckons. Our talents? Our character? These readings call us to reconsider what and who God calls us to be and grow into. And then one more thing... the Christian journey is always interdependent, always about our neighbour as much as ourselves. We need the love, support and kindness of others and they need ours, so our first reading leaves us with these words:

*Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*

So may it be,

Amen.