

Good and Faithful Servant

When and where a story is told and heard very much shapes the response both of storyteller and listener. Context is all. I was thinking back over past years when I have preached on this particular gospel. One year it was the middle of the banking crisis; people would have been delighted with a 50% or 100% return on their investments just then. On another occasion it was the beginning of an interregnum in a parish which used to “leave it to the vicar to do everything“. They were having to learn they, as well as the vicar, had been given gifts to use. Jesus’ original hearers in the Roman occupied ancient middle east would have heard this story rather differently from C21 westerners in a capitalist culture. There’s potentially an interesting sermon to preach from that perspective, but not today.

Here at Christ Church, in this year of lockdowns, the story is probably heard differently yet again. Earlier this year we embarked on the Time and Talents challenge which very much drew its inspiration from this gospel story. It wasn’t £2.5 million (5 talents) being handed out but £20, as seedcorn to invest in projects to raise money for this east end refurbishment. We were well aware of the range of gifts and talents in this congregation and the willingness of people to use them and share them. Despite the challenges of lockdown Time and Talents prospered and raised quite a substantial sum. And the very continuation of services and church life during the lockdown and the periods of restriction again demonstrate many gifts within the church community being used for the benefit of others. Gifts of pastoral care, gifts of technological wizardry, gifts of musicianship, gifts of project management, to name just a few. So how do we, this morning, sharing this service remotely, hear this familiar story? What do we hear God saying to us from it for the context in which we now are?

The wealthy man differentiated in what he gave his servants, it wasn’t one size fits all. He had assessed what he thought they were capable of handling, what he thought was appropriate to their level of skill and experience. So one got 5 talents to work with, one 2 and the third just 1. But the point was, each received something to work with, even the smallest amount was £0.5m in today’s terms, not a trifling sum by any means. Some may seem more gifted than others, but all have received gifts richly from God that are appropriate for the challenge in hand. As Paul discovered, when hard pressed, God’s word to him at that time was ‘My grace is sufficient for you’.

The key criterion by which these men were judged on their master’s return was that of **faithfulness**. Had they done what they knew their master wanted of them? That was far more important than the actual amount of their trading success, although in fact the trading result was the outcome of their faithfulness, or lack of it. They all knew what he wanted and expected. That means they had invested

time and energy in getting to know and understand their master, to know what his aspirations and objectives were, learning how he would be using his money if he were here and trading in person. Two of them acted on that knowledge and understanding and on his return were rewarded for their faithfulness by being given further responsibility.

Think about that in terms of our own faithfulness. It calls for an investment of our time and effort in deepening our knowledge and love of God and of our understanding of what he is about in this world.

Another important part of their faithfulness, which earned them their reward on his return, was their **perseverance**. They hadn't just rushed out and placed one big bet on the stock exchange, made their 100% return and then sat back. Their success, the demonstration of their faithfulness, was the outcome of their continued activity throughout his absence. They carried on doing what their master wanted until he returned.

Maybe that's an important point for us to take on board in these times of lockdown and of limited access to church. Despite the weariness of lockdown#2, the disappointment of not being in church, of not being able to easily greet or chat or visit one another, the limitations of social distancing, of events cancelled or postponed, of no after-church coffee, of Cedar Tree being in suspense, despite all that, we are called to persevere, to carry on faithfully using the gifts we have been given, even if in a rather different way.

Perhaps part of that faithful perseverance at this time is patiently and prayerfully nurturing a vision of what the life of this church and its role in this community will be when some degree of normality returns. All churches are having to do that. Dioceses are having to do that. Things are unlikely to be the same, but we will be serving and worshipping the same God, engaged in his mission of sharing his love with this world and calling us to join with him in doing so. What is he doing at this time of lockdown? What will he be doing when lockdown ends? What is he calling us – individually and as a community – to join him in doing? What new gifts, talents, might he be offering us to use in his service in these strange times and in the times that will follow?

The third servant. Oh dear! What went wrong? He had the same knowledge of his master, the same understanding of his aims and objectives. But he didn't do anything. He wouldn't even put the money in the bank to earn a bit of interest. Was he just lazy? No, I think he was **fearful**. He was petrified with fear, terrified of losing the money and incurring his master's wrath. So he dug a hole and buried the money and then carried on doing nothing until the master came back.

Fear is very prevalent at the moment. Fear of Covid19 in particular. I came across someone the other day who was so frightened of catching it that it was totally distorting his decision making processes, literally making him ill. Fear of an impending lockdown was affecting some people as much as the actual lockdown, as they feared for the consequences for their jobs and their physical and mental well being. Fear about the outcome of the US election, or the Brexit negotiations, or the ability of the NHS to cope in a second wave has affected many. There are many in the churches who are fearful for the consequences of the current situation in terms of lost attendances that may never return, lost finances that may not be recouped, their ability to continue to pay for ministry. Fear can paralyze, just like it did the third man who buried his money and waited for the master to return.

The church in Philippi must have been in a similar state of fear when Paul wrote to them 'Do not worry about anything, but in everythinglet your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus'.

Money under the mattress or buried in the ground doesn't keep pace with inflation and loses its value in real terms. Those who, whether through fear, or laziness, are content in the life of the church to leave it all to others, or to the priest, or who try to "preserve" ways of doing theology or worship or ministry unchanged are left with devalued currency, an ultimately worthless currency. Faith, trust in God, can be an antidote to fear. Faith is given to us to be developed, spiritual understanding to be deepened, sacrificial service to be extended, vision to be realised, opportunities for mission to be seized. **Faithfulness and perseverance rather than fearfulness.**

This, like many of the stories Jesus told, is a story with loose ends. We don't hear what further task the first two servants were given, put in charge of many things. Nor do we hear what actually happened to the third one, whether the master's verdict of what he deserved was actually implemented. Our story, too, has many loose ends, especially at this time. But with God's help to be faithful and persevering, and to avoid the paralysis of fearfulness, we may perhaps find some of those ends and tie them.