

Matthew 25: 14-30, 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11

A Sermon written by Revd Carol Harley

*May my words be true to God Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen*

After several challenging parables one after another, St Matthew records yet another one in our Gospel reading for today. So perhaps we should look again at what this most challenging of parables might be telling us.

It seems to me that the third servant, the one who buries the talent and gets into trouble, is the careful one, the one who shies away from the risks of the cut-and-thrust commerce of his master to pursue a steadier, more respectable option. Not for him the master's harsh financial world of high risk and high return, let alone the stock market or the roulette wheel. Slow and steady was his rule for living – and how many of us were brought up to think just this way?

But, like it or not, the third servant does actually seem to be the villain of the piece. And the sharp, uncompromising business leader so feared by the third servant, not only feared, but despised too, well he appears to be entirely justified in his demands. Jesus regularly shocks us like this with his parables, calling us out of our comfort zone and confronting us with awkward truths that will change our faith if we're open to them. These parables are like landmines, determined to upset our comfortable religion.

And Jesus is making this point as clearly as possible in today's Gospel. Don't think of God as some indulgent uncle who'll do whatever we ask, who'll stroke and affirm us and never challenge us. And as for us we are not to be like those whose first priority is their own peace of mind and the calm it brings, whose highest goal is business as usual and the calm it brings. Think of God, instead as a dynamic tycoon, urgent about the business of building up his kingdom. Once again, Jesus shatters the comfortable, with an intentionally confronting and disturbing image of an urgent God who isn't interested in preserving our comfort zone and our established religious habits. We live in a world of injustice and also one of spiritual hunger that cries out to heaven, where is the Christian, where is the Church? Too often the good news of God is buried in the ground by individual Christians and by Churches.

Now, perhaps the demanding master in our gospel is too close for comfort of what you have to face at work, or else he recalls bad memories. I know he does for me. I've worked in the past for a hard man whose only aim was success and prestige at any cost and I and my colleagues worked in an atmosphere of constant threat. We've experienced the fear and anger that many of you have experienced in a culture of an arrogant manager, where the pressure's on to do things you didn't approve of or couldn't see the point of – just like the third servant in today's Gospel who was afraid of his harsh master and who, in

burying his talent, made his fate worse than being passed over, or being made redundant, which are the usual results when we come across this sort of situation at work.

All of this is confronting and unpleasant, but that is Jesus' intention – to make us realise in no uncertain terms that the Kingdom of God will make demands on us that disrupt us and unbalance us, but which we must not resist. This is a warning for all of us as individual Christians who have been given the faith but have done nothing with it whose life of faith is no more developed than it ever was.

And this is a warning to all Christian Churches to not to keep everything as it was, but to be prepared to roll up our sleeves and work with the talent we've been given: to work with our outreach; with our money; with our buildings; with our lay people some of whom may just be waiting to be asked; with our liturgy and music whether we are clergy or laity. The challenge is for all of us, and for every Christian parish, diocese and denomination.

A final word. Let's not forget that challenge and comfort are always inseparable for Christians. Listen to Saint Paul today in 1 Thessalonians he shares the message of judgement and urgency that mark both of our readings today, as we approach the end of the Christian year in the lead-up to Advent. But Paul offers comfort in the way he gives this challenge to the Church. He assures us that this challenge is not too hard for us. 'But you, friends, are not in the dark, the day will not come on you like a thief. You are all children of light, children of day. We do not belong to the night or darkness, and we must not sleep as others do, but keep awake and sober'.

Here is Saint Paul, the pastoral leader at work once again, pressing the challenge of the Gospel but doing so in a way that helps a tough message to find a willing audience. And so it's entirely right today that the tough face the challenge of Jesus in our Gospel. It comes to us not as a confrontation but as a challenging invitation with the promise of grace and forgiveness.

The challenge is that we avoid being in love with a comfortable religion like the third servant, and that we don't underestimate what God wants of us regarding the mission of Christians and Churches, that burying the talent is never an option. But the harsh and urgent God of the parable is also the pastoral God of St Paul, so we can face the challenges ahead.

*In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen*