

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 15th November 2020
Second Sunday before Advent

Collect

Heavenly Lord,
you long for the world's salvation:
stir us from apathy,
restrain us from excess
and revive in us new hope
that all creation will one day be healed
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! 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; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 25:14-30

'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather

where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Sermon by John Richardson

This week I received a letter from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs informing me that I am no longer required to fill in a tax return. Needless to say, this was good news. But then I received another letter, this time from my accountant, telling me that this might change if I won the lottery. As I don't do the lottery, this is unlikely to be a problem. If I did do it and won a few millions I would have a problem - not only with the tax man - because I wouldn't know what to do with it except give it away.

The servants in today's Gospel had no such problem. They must have thought they had won the lottery. Yet they were clearly so fearful of their master's wrath if they got it wrong that two of them decided the only thing to do was to invest the money wisely. The third servant decided that the safest course of action was to bury it.

The sums with which the servants are entrusted are considerable. Apparently a labourer could live at a basic level for fifteen years on just one talent. So these are enormous sums of money. They are an indication that something really important is happening here. The servants are being entrusted with something beyond their wildest dreams. So they must make the right decision and use the money wisely

The word "talent" comes into our English language from this parable. We use the word to describe a natural ability, a God-given gift - given to us so that we may use it in the service of God and our fellow human beings.

As far as the master in the parable is concerned, he is making an investment and expects a good return on his investment. Here is the business of commerce and finance at work. Matthew uses it to compare it with the business of life in the service of God. The parable compares the use of all that God has given us - all that we have and all that we are - with a financial investment in order to make a profit. Two of the servants do well and are commended for it. The third servant fails miserably. He makes no effort at all, except to bury the talent, hopefully where no one will find it.

We might think that the master is being unreasonable in his treatment of the third servant. At least he gets his money back. But he is not being unreasonable. The servant turns out to be either lazy or fearful of the consequences if he gets it wrong and loses his master's money.

What God has given us - our selves, our lives, our faith, our abilities, our gifts, our possessions - is given to us so that we might invest them and make a profit. Our lives are to be used in God's service so that they become the source of blessing for others and for ourselves. If we try merely to preserve all that we have and all that we are and not make use of it but hide it away, then we will lose it.

With interest rates at an all-time low, we might think it best to keep our savings in a tin box under the bed, just like Arkwright did in Open all Hours. Yet putting it in the bank or the building society is a risk. Whilst you might make more money, you could lose it, especially if the bank goes bust or someone robs it.

In order to keep his talent the servant has to risk it. If he did not risk it, he was bound to lose it. Yet even burying it was a risk - someone might find it.

But then life is all about risk. We cannot really live by playing safe all the time. This is especially true of a life lived for God. All that God gives us is given to be risked in new ventures in God's service. Every new step we take in living for God is a risk. If we stand still - clinging for safety to what we already have and are - we risk losing what we have. We can keep it only by risking it in going further. And every time we take the risk and bring God's blessings to others and to ourselves, we find that we are entrusted with more. It's as if Jesus is saying "You can take the risk or not, but if you do not, you are bound to lose." We are reminded of another saying of Jesus: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

This parable is a call to take a chance, to be adventurous, to place your bets, to take a risk. That is what discipleship is all about. Betting your life, being prepared to take risks, to move from security to uncertainty, to believe that what you are being called to do as a follower of Jesus is to take risks for the sake of the Gospel and the building of God's kingdom. It's about taking the kind of risk which the Gospel presents us with. If the risk pays off, the Kingdom will be advanced. But be warned - if you take the risk and it pays off - you will be entrusted with more, which will ask you to take even more risk.

At this present time, so many people are finding life difficult. So it's even more important that we should use the talents and gifts God has given us and not hide them away. There has never been a more vital time when our God-given gifts and talents are needed. We may feel that the sort of gifts and talents we have are of little use to those who are finding life so difficult at the moment. But that would be a mistake.

We have witnessed so much selfless and compassionate use of people's gifts and talents - not least in the NHS and the care services. But it goes so much further than that. It extends to us as well. No doubt every one of us is doing what we can to ease the burden of others and to bring them hope and love and faith in such dark times. We need to remember that whatever we can do is because we have been given such a great variety of gifts by God. A cause for great rejoicing and thanksgiving. A reminder to us that we must not bury them or hide them away.

A reminder also that living lives in the service of God calls us to take risks.

Amen.