

Sermon preached by Trevor on Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> November 2017

Matthew 25.14-30 (2<sup>nd</sup> before Advent)

If there's one thing about Jesus it's that he tells a good story, grabbing the attention of his hearers, and holding them, rapt, as they wait to discover what will happen next or how it will all end. And many of his stories are not just straightforward stories, but parables – stories that seem on the face of it to be about one thing, but in reality turn out to be about something else altogether – and it may only be later, after a bit of pondering, that the penny drops, and that real meaning begins to dawn on his hearers, or on us.

And that's how it is, I think, with the story contained in our Gospel reading this morning. A story about a very rich man who goes off on a long journey, and leaves his servants behind, each with a very large sum of his money to dispose of as they will. A 'talent' in biblical terms is reckoned to have been the equivalent of what a day labourer might expect to earn in fifteen years! So this is no everyday circumstance. It's the equivalent of a fairy-tale beginning – like the king who asks each of his three daughters how much they love him, having decided that he will divide up his kingdom between them in accordance with the amount of love they profess. It's a bit silly; but it captures our imagination. What will each of the daughters say, and what will happen after that? Or, in this case, what will each of these three men, suddenly in possession with wealth they are unaccustomed to, do with it? And what will happen after that? The rich man, we are told, 'entrusted them with it', so we know he's coming back, and going to be asking questions when he does! They've been set a test: and the question is, will they pass it?

On the face of it, apart from being a good yarn, this story might seem to be an instance of Jesus trying his hand at the role of independent financial adviser, extolling the virtues of free-market capitalism and prudent investments on the stock market. But, of course it isn't. This is a parable, and on its face, therefore, is exactly where we *shouldn't* expect to find its real meaning.

So, what *is* it about then? The clue, I think, is to be found in where Matthew chooses to place this story in his gospel: It comes in the midst of a large block of Jesus' teaching about the end of the age, the longed-for Day of the Lord, and is the third of four stories Jesus tells in a row about the unexpected arrival of that day. Each story involves a master, or a bridegroom, or a rich man, or a king, whose return or arrival is anticipated by everyone, but who nonetheless comes unexpectedly, sooner than anyone thought. And each story concentrates on the judgments made by the returnee on what he finds going on – or *not* going on – when he gets there.

So, in our story, the real focus isn't on the two slaves who make a good capital return on the investment of their master's wealth; it's on the attitude and the actions of the one slave who doesn't, who buries the wealth in the backyard (which, in gospel times was actually considered a pretty good security measure), or hides it under the bed in a large sock –

actions which might reasonably be reckoned prudent, the slave being unwilling to put his master's property at risk, and ensuring that it's there for him when he gets back.

If now we begin to unpick the encoded threads of the story, Jesus is the man who is going on a journey – a journey through suffering, death, resurrection and glorious return to his Father's side. And while he's away he leaves us things to be getting on with, and gives us resources to enable us to get on with them. And – the note of urgency in the parable – he's coming back, and although we don't know when, the parable suggests that it will be when we least expect it ('like a thief in the night' as Paul puts it in our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians). And *when* he returns he's going to be looking and asking questions to discover what we have been up to in his absence. As the T-shirt design has it: 'Jesus is coming – look busy!'

Because this is precisely a parable about the importance of what happens in-between, in-between Jesus' death and resurrection, and his eventual return in glory and in judgement, when God will bring the whole project of creation (and human history along with it) to its fitting conclusion, and take it up into the glory of his new creation – 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven' as the hymn has it. It's a glorious hope, something supremely to 'look forward to' as we say. But, Jesus is telling us in no uncertain terms in this story, what happens in the interim, what we get up to in the meanwhile, in the here and the now, *matters*.

Discipleship, being followers of as well as believers in Jesus, is not and cannot be a matter of waiting around for something to happen, even if that something is something as incredible and remarkable as Christ's return and the final coming of God's kingdom to a world that so sorely needs it. We might suppose that, mightn't we? We might suppose that if God is going get his hands dirty in the world again in a way that puts things right once and for all, doing what only God *can* do, bringing to a glorious fulfilment and redemption all that is good in the world, and purging it finally of all that spoils and disfigures and corrupts the world, then what we do in the meanwhile is of relatively little significance. Only God can put it right; only God can make good the brokenness and alienation; only God can banish evil from our institutions, our hearts and minds; only God can transform the world into what he always intended it to be and longs for it to be. Anything we do is by comparison infinitely tiny, spitting in the wind, or – as the theologian P T Forsyth puts it – meeting the Atlantic with a mop! We cannot even begin to make a difference of the scale and sort needed to establish God's kingdom, to usher in the new creation, to redeem the world and draw it fully into the glory and the love of God. How could we? So, surely the essence of hope is a patient waiting, an expectant sitting around, a knowing toleration of the messiness and darkness of so much of life in the world in the meanwhile – confident that something better is on its way?

We might suppose that. But this parable tells us something very different. Discipleship, and Christian hope as part of that, is not and cannot be passive or quietistic. On the contrary, this time 'in-between', this peculiar era of being 'in the meanwhile' is and must be a time of action, of involvement in projects, refusing to let the quality and the characteristics of so much in the world 'here and now' (sin, suffering, injustice, death) have its say unchallenged; beginning already, in the thick of it all, to play out the characteristic patterns and roles and

leitmotifs of the coming kingdom; not waiting for it to break in from above in all its fullness, but striving already to allow it to break out within our ways of living and believing and speaking and acting. NOT because doing so will necessarily bring the kingdom any closer: that's in God's hands and will happen in God's good time. But because this is what we are called, commanded even, to do.

Jesus goes away, and promises to return. And in the meanwhile he gives us things to do, and provides us with the wherewithal to do them. And such things – various ways of behaving as though the kingdom had *already* come, because in our hearts it already *has* – are not 'worth doing' because, having done them, we can see precisely the difference they make (sometimes we shall be able to, and sometimes what we do will be washed away again by the tide of events or swallowed up by more powerful and less savoury forces). No – they are worth doing because they are *good* to do; good in themselves; splinters of light in an often dark world. And we are commanded to do them. To take whatever God has given us by way of resources, and to use those resources NOT to redeem the world (they are never going to suffice for that), but simply to perform acts of what one American theologian calls 'guerilla theatre'. Performances of kingdom living in the midst of a world currently ruled by a very different set of powers and authorities. Pockets of active resistance in a world occupied by and in the grip of forces whose allegiance is not to God but to things opposed to all that God is and was and will be.

Christian history, from the Acts of the Apostles onwards, is filled with acts of seeming futility when measured in terms of a calculus concerned with saving the world or tipping the balance and provoking the coming of God's kingdom. Yet such acts were and are deemed 'saintly'; 'holy; intrinsically good in their faith anticipation of or bearing witness to the substance of that kingdom, and reflecting the character of the God whose kingdom it is and will be.

Acts of *futility*, and often acts of considerable *risk* too. Risks to the well-being or survival of individuals, or of congregations; risks deemed worth taking for the sake of doing what seemed to be right, of engaging in strategies of resistance to 'the powers that be', of performing acts of 'guerrilla theatre'.

And it's that theme of risk that brings us back to the particular point of the parable we are considering. After all, what the third slave in Jesus' story did *not* do was to *risk* the resources which his master had given him. After all, playing the stock market can be a risky business. Stocks and shares, as the small print (or the rapid, hardly audible disclaimer at the end of TV and radio advertisements for financial products) remind us, may go down as well as up. Investments may fail as well as succeed. And this man is clearly prudent rather than a venture capitalist. And he does what he does to keep what his master has entrusted to him safe and sound. If we didn't already know the end of the story, we might reasonably expect at least a commendation of his behavior. But instead he gets lambasted, gets the sharp edge of his master's tongue, and gets banished to outer darkness, which, whatever it is, can't be a good thing! It all seems a bit unfair.

But you know, what he's punished for in the story isn't his actions, but the motivation of those actions. And that's not concern for safeguarding his master's property; it's *fear*. Fear of the consequences of investing it, and failing, not having any concrete return to show for

having done so, and having to face the consequences. This is a man who won't *risk* anything, but instead battens down the hatches with what he has, secure, he thinks, that at least that can't be lost or taken away from him.

Jesus goes away, and promises to return; and in the meanwhile he gives us things to do and he furnishes resources, gives us the things we need, to engage in those activities. To facilitate our hopeful living, our performances of kingdom living on the world stage. But fear can cripple us, too. Fear of taking any risks. Fear of having made no demonstrable difference. Fear of our own survival, or the survival of our congregation, or our buildings, as the inclement conditions of life in the world keep coming at us in waves and threatening to overwhelm us. And, rather than asking what God is calling us to *do* with what he has given us, what we *can* do with what God has given us to make God's kingdom known in word and deed, the temptation is ever there to do what this man in Jesus' parable does: to hide what he has given us under the bed or under a bushel; to bury it in the ground where it will still be safe and sound tomorrow and the next day, and the next. And we can sleep sound in our beds, knowing that we have some security.

The message of this parable, I suggest, is that security doesn't come with the territory of discipleship. That investing whatever God has given us, and gives us, and will give us, in projects which may, measured by the world, be futile and ridiculous, and which may even be risky for ourselves and our future, is what Jesus calls us to do. And that sort of willingness to risk ourselves for the sake of kingdom ventures, for the sake of others around us, for the sake of their good rather than our own, comes not from fear, but from the liberating power of hope: from a hope that knows who God is, knows who he will always be, and trusts that even in the thick of futility and risk, he promises to be faithful to us, and calls us to be faithful to his call and to what he has given us to work with in responding to it.