

Sunday Morning Worship

Readings and Prayers 19th November 2023



Zephaniah 1.7, 12-18

Be silent before the Lord GOD!

For the day of the LORD is at hand;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice,
he has consecrated his guests.

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the people
who rest complacently on their dregs,
those who say in their hearts,
'The LORD will not do good,
nor will he do harm.'

Their wealth shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.

Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them.

The great day of the LORD is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter,
the warrior cries aloud there.

That day will be a day of wrath,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,
a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

I will bring such distress upon people
that they shall walk like the blind;
because they have sinned against the LORD,
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.

Neither their silver nor their gold
will be able to save them
on the day of the LORD's wrath;
in the fire of his passion
the whole earth shall be consumed;
for a full, a terrible end
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

This is the word of the Lord.

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.

This is the word of the Lord.

Matthew 25.14-20

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.

Glory to you, O Lord.

'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.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Reflection (by Ann Waizeneker)

I love the story of the minister who dreamed that he was preaching a sermon – and woke up to find he was! A salutary warning to stay awake and alert when we need to be awake and alert!

There are echoes of this wakeup call in all three of our readings this morning.

The prophet Zephaniah doesn't mince his words as he tries to jolt the people of Judah out of their complacency. All around him he sees laziness and apathy with little attention to holiness. The people have been seduced by a superficial, joy seeking world, and convinced themselves this is acceptable behaviour in the eyes of God. Zephaniah puts them right; "God will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs." Strong language to try to bring them back to faith.

St Paul too speaks frankly to the young Christian community in Thessalonica. He tells them not to waste energy speculating on when the Lord may return; that could be any time. Far more importantly, they need to focus on how they prepare for that return. There is an urgency to his words which demand action from his readers, but he's not scaremongering. Rather, he says, we are all children of light, and we have a whole armour from God to help and protect us if we choose to wear it – a breastplate of faith and love, and a helmet for the hope of salvation. And he reminds the Thessalonians to look out for each other, to encourage and build one another up.

So blunt, frank words in both the Old and New Testament readings, to get God's people back on track so to speak, to remind them that there will be a reckoning. And this continues in our Gospel reading – the parable of the talents.

Now we tend to think of this primarily as a story about how we use our God given gifts and talents. But let's not overlook that it is a tale about a master going away and then returning to see what has been done with his possessions. So again, another focus on the future, another reminder of the second coming, that how we live now, our investment in all God has created, matters. No room for complacency or snoozing!

I don't know about you, but I have always felt rather sorry for the slave who buried his one talent to keep it safe. After all, he didn't do anything

wrong. But the point seems to be that he is punished for what he didn't do – for not using his gifts.

I have a priest friend, Jess, who makes a drawing each week inspired by one of the Sunday readings – that is one of her gifts! In 2020 her painting of the parable of the talents prompted us to think about why the punishment of the man who buried his talent is so severe. Jess sketches someone who needs help badly. And beside him, a man who is walking away. Through her art she suggests this is the person who could have helped him, using his God-given gift, but who decided to ignore that calling, instead burying his talent.

In her visual interpretation Jess infers that the severity of the punishment implies that in some way, the man turning away was hurting someone else. I think that's an interesting way to look at this story because it gives it an extra dimension. Often, we look at this parable in the context of it being primarily about ourselves, our courage, our willingness to do the work God wants us to do. But as Jess points out, let's not overlook the effect our actions, or inaction, may have on others. Let's not overlook our responsibility to them and to God. In other words, this is bigger than just our desires and fears, what we want to do. We have a duty, a responsibility to those around us.

So here's a question you and I might like to ponder on: what holds each of us back from using all the gifts God has given us? I imagine there are lots of reasons.

For example, perhaps, as Jess suggests, we have never thought of this parable in terms of the hurt we may be inflicting by not stepping up to the mark, pushing ourselves that little bit further than we are comfortable with.

Or perhaps we don't recognise some of our gifts or can't see how to use them in God's service. We may be guilty of false modesty. In which case

let's pray someone else will point out our talents and encourage us, as St Paul urges the Thessalonians. The point being that sometimes we don't see in us what others perceive, and we need a nudge.

Then again, perhaps we don't always use our gifts because we are afraid of failure. The slave in the parable tells his master just that. If we think about it, it's probably true for most, or all of us, that we do sometimes shrink from doing something through fear and a conviction that certain things are beyond us. And yet, isn't it true that we learn more from our failures than successes?

We haven't all been given the same gifts but the test for us is not how many gifts we have – that is God's business – but how we use them, which is very much our business. These gifts are not badges of status; they are tools for furthering God's purposes. And we are encouraged to use those tools, to invest our talent on God's behalf, not bury it. And unlike the minster I opened this reflection with, let's not fall asleep on the job!

Prayers

Gathered as God's people, let us pray.

To the bidding: Christ will come again

Please respond: make us ready to meet him.

Christ will come again:

make us ready to meet him.

Holy God, if we are presuming on your mercy,
alert us and shatter our complacency;
if we are doubting your mercy,
affirm in us the reality of your forgiveness.
May we, as the church, encourage and warn,
but never condemn;

acknowledge sin, but never judge.

Silence

Christ will come again:

make us ready to meet him.

Holy God, raise up prophets to speak your truth,
and draw attention to whatever needs changing
in our world, our expectations and assumptions,
our management of resources and finances,
our systems of government and our attitudes.

May all peoples come to recognise your truth.

Silence

Christ will come again:

make us ready to meet him.

Holy God, fill our homes and places of work
with so much love that tensions
and barriers are melted away,
conflicts are resolved
and troubles lightened by being lovingly shared.
Open our hearts to hope again, where we had given up.

Silence

Christ will come again:

make us ready to meet him.

Holy God, may all in misery or despair
Turn to find you close beside them in their heartache,
not condemning but loving them in their pain.
May all who locked in terror or guilt be set free,
and may those whom long term illness wearies
be strengthened to persevere.

From our own community we pray for: Philippa Boulter,
Anuwat Wanggane, Alan Coe, Sam and Andy Fellows, Jack Tubby,
Stacey Pearce, Michael Orton, Roger Jones, Patricia Ash, Jo Bunn,

Jason Thomson, Ryan Day, Bryan Plester, Brenda Hulland, David New,
and Adrina and Alan Price.

Silence

Christ will come again:

make us ready to meet him.

Holy God, Lord of the living and the dead,
we commend to your mercy all who have died,
and thank you for that eternal healing
which frees us from all pain and suffering.

We remember the recently departed and all who mourn their loss.

And we remember with love and gratitude those whose anniversary of
death falls at this time: Libby Sheehan, Ella Macdonald, Max Plummer,
Gillian Plester, Colin Baker, John Sayers.

Grant us with them a share in your eternal kingdom.

Silence

Christ will come again:

make us ready to meet him.

Holy God, we thank you for the gifts and talents
you have given us.

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Give us the courage to use them
for the good of the world.

Merciful father,

**accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.**

Amen.