

“Kingdom Choices”

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



We're in the season between All Saints and Advent – and Matthew's parables of the kingdom are front and centre. This three-week period is also known as 'kingdom season', and one theme is the reign of Christ - in heaven and on the earth; and by extension, in our lives.

Last week at Remembrance we looked at the parable of the ten bridesmaids, waiting for the return of the Bridegroom – five were ready and five weren't. Jesus' message was 'be ready' for his return. And today, our reading reminds us again that the Lord is returning. His kingdom is at once present and 'not yet'.

This morning we have another parable of the kingdom. A Landowner gives talents (in effect a vast sum of money) to three different slaves. The first has five talents and he makes it grow – five more accrue. Well done, good and faithful servant. The second has two talents and he makes those grow too, to four. Well done good and faithful servant. The third (there's always a third, and we know it's going to go badly for him...) The 3rd slave had a different approach.

'Master', he says, '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'. What did this servant do? He hid the talent in the ground. He still has it, he can give it back, but it hasn't grown into anything. Is that so bad? This servant hasn't done anything wrong, at first sight; he's not gone and murdered anyone; he's not committed adultery or slandered his neighbour. It's more a sin of omission, than commission. He was afraid, and he hid his talent.

It doesn't go down well. He's described as worthless and meets a sticky end. And then there's the haunting verse 29: 'to all those who have, more will be given (...) but from those who have nothing, even what they do have will be taken away'. It's not very Christian! Aren't we more used to saying: 'fair shares for all'?

But ponder the following thought: in the Christian life we often talk in terms of 'shoulds' and 'oughts'; we should give more, we should pray more; we ought to love more, serve more, read the bible more, etc. How about if we look at things in a different way – how does the kingdom *actually* work? Because the kingdom, that is, the rule of God in our

lives – is operating under its own principles whether we notice it or not. When Jesus is king, the kingdom is operating already, although it's not always clear to us here on the earth in the way it'll become clear when Christ is fully revealed. But more of that at Advent!

When we read that difficult verse 29, 'to all those who have, more will be given (...) but from those who have nothing, even what they do have will be taken away', we might think of this as a description of how the kingdom operates. The kingdom operates under its own law, if you like. Just like temporal law, kingdom 'law' operates whether people realise it or not.

It's a bit like when people fill out their insurance claims after poor driving has resulted in an accident. Some people drive as if there are no consequences to their actions, but the law is operating regardless. And some reports do suggest that people were unaware of various penalties that would kick in after reckless driving, regardless of how blameless they might feel.

Some actual examples of reports on insurance claims: 'a pedestrian hit me and went under my car'. 'I had been driving for 40 years when I fell asleep at the wheel and had an accident'; and my favourite: 'I was taking my canary to the hospital. It got loose in the car and flew out the window. The next thing I saw was his rear end and there was a crash.'

So this kingdom dynamic is something to do with how we use what God has entrusted to us, - whether that's talents, skills, time or energy. If we trust enough to let those grow in the service of others, we'll be blessed; if we don't we're in some way diminished, and if that dynamic continues long enough, we appear to have less than we started with. It seems if we spend a lifetime holding back from God, we gradually lose all appetite for God.

This has implications for how we grow as Christians. Take the desire to become more prayerful, for example. It's easy to look around the church and assume that prayerful people have always been prayerful, for instance. But there was a day when they began, and then they carried on, and often they felt like they were failing. They found prayer boring, it seemed ineffective. But as they fell and persevered, and fell and persevered, they eventually became prayerful people. In the words of Richard Rohr, by falling, they fell upwards.

Prayerful people are people who over time, have spent time praying. They're not more holy than anyone else; they've simply invested their energy in that direction. And God has multiplied those efforts – and often exponentially.

Unlike the landowner, who's not a terribly attractive figure, God lovingly entrusts us with the capacity to respond to the divine invitation, whilst cheering us on! And if you think about it, this represents a risk on God's part. He gives us gifts, but how will we respond?

Will the gifts we are given end up like the gifts we used to give my grandma at Christmas? As someone who married at the outbreak of war, my paternal grandma was something of a saver and a hoarder. One year when I was visiting she showed me a cupboard in which, stacked terribly neatly, were dozens of boxes of soap; tea towels; writing paper, scarves, handkerchiefs and other pristine gifts that various family members had given her over the years.

It was a bit like the third slave who hoarded his talent. When grandma was asked what she intended doing with all this stash, she replied with great jollity that she sometimes gave the gifts away for Christmas. There was much mirth in my family as we contemplated what it would be like to gift her some things we would like ourselves, in the hope that eventually they would come back to us.

This relationship between gift and response is explored in CS Lewis's classic novel, *The Great Divorce*. This is a fiction about two very different places that might depict (we are not sure) the lives of those who are open to God and the lives of those who close themselves off. It's an unsettling story that suggests that kingdom values are not the same as the values that are often held on the earth.

In the story the narrator finds himself in a drab grey town made up of rather dismal streets which all look the same and which seem deserted. Although a steady stream of people is constantly arriving in the town, no sooner do they arrive than they quarrel with their neighbours and move as far away from them as possible, so the city is expanding, whilst becoming ever more diffuse. It's a rather depressing place but you don't have to try very hard here – because everything you need just appears as you imagine it. There's no striving, no need to achieve, but also no joy.

If you want to, you can take a bus journey to another place - which the narrator does - and you can either visit for a day, or if you like it, you can stay. When the bus arrives at this other place, and the people get out, they're a bit shocked to find everything is very bright and hard. It's quite an effort even to walk on the grass at first, until you've acclimatised.

He writes: '...the light, the grass, the trees (...) were different; made of some different substance, so much solidier than things in our country (...) Moved by a sudden thought, I bent down and tried to pluck a daisy that was growing at my feet. The stalk wouldn't break. I tried to twist it, but it wouldn't twist. I tugged till the sweat stood out on my forehead and I had lost most of the skin off my hands' (p. 27).

All this hard reality proves too difficult for some of the bus people. First there's the shock of meeting people there who have lived in the bright place a while, and who are full of enthusiasm for how one can flourish here. The 'Bright people' try and persuade the others to stay, but lots of these invitations sound rather challenging. The bus people can't understand that by staying they'll need to let go of their egos and embrace the

fellowship and love of others. For people who are used to arguing with their neighbours, this sounds wholly unreasonable. Most return to the bus in disgust.

In the fiction, Lewis imagines the outworking of a lifetime of human choices about God's invitation. Each person has a choice to go onwards with the guide that's been sent them but that journey is to be freely chosen - and accordingly they make their own destiny.

The title of the book is after William Blake who wrote *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* – a concept which to Lewis is theologically dubious – hence his title: *The Great Divorce*. Whether you're more Blake or Lewis, the message loud and clear in both readings today is be alert, be ready – choices we make do matter, and there's accountability woven into the invitation of God.

'Tell me, what is it you plan to do/with your one wild and precious life', asked the poet Mary Oliver. Whatever we do with this life we've been given, if we're following Christ, we will be living in the light of a returning saviour and Lord. Paul seems to say two different things in the Thessalonians reading. First he says, 'you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night' (we think of the sudden return of the Bridegroom from last week's parable).

But then he reassures the Thessalonians: 'but you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief'. No, they are children of the light and as such are encouraged to stay awake and stay alert so that when Christ returns they're not caught unawares. In fact, they will have been living as though it might happen tomorrow. What a thought.

And till that time, we wait. It's very hard to wait because it feels as though we're powerless. Political prisoners waiting for release and justice, victims of a dragged-out war: these are people who have a long hard wait. But many of us have lived with or are still living with really difficult situations, whether of mental illness, bereavement or ill health, that feel intolerable and yet, often all we can do is wait.

And while the landowner was away, the servants waited, and put their talents to work (or buried them). They didn't know when he'd be back. And this is always a feature of the parables of the kingdom – there's a wait – a delay, even. But the faithful servants are the ones who are attentive to their master's wishes, even though he is absent. Waiting is part of the Christian life and it's no coincidence that the word *patience* has the same root as the word *passion* (as in the passion of Christ). We sometimes have to bear a lot for an unspecified period of time.

And finally we think of our brothers and sisters in Palestine and Israel who are bearing such a great deal. 'Sudden destruction will come upon them', a quotation from the Thessalonians reading, sounds horribly up to the minute for those caught up in the bitter conflict in the Middle East; for people in the depths of bereavement, for the injustices of

a brutal occupation and the rise of age-old antisemitism. That wait for justice and a just resolution is part of the pain of being human and particularly being a human in the Middle East. We continue to cry out to God to raise up peacemakers and keep people from despair.

And may we be given grace to respond to God's invitation and put our resources to work. May we know multiplication of love, mercy, peace, prayerfulness and eagerness to keep looking out and preparing for the return of the King.

Come, Lord Jesus.

Amen.