

1 Thessalonians 5.1-11; Matthew 25.14-30**1 Thessalonians 5.1-11**

⁵Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When 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! ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But 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. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 25.14-30 The Parable of the Talents

[Matthew 25.1 'Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids ...']

¹⁴ 'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then 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." ²¹His 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." ²²And 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." ²³His 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." ²⁴Then 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; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." ²⁶But 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? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For 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. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

[Mt 25.31-end : the judgement of the nations: ³¹ 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ...]

1 Thess. 5.11 ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Here, at Great St Mary's, we host some wonderful occasions during the week, among them are British Empire Medal (BEM) investiture ceremonies led by the Lord Lieutenant of Cambridgeshire. Since 2012, the British Empire Medal has been an honours award given to people in our local communities, who make a huge difference to society and the people around them. We had such a BEM investiture here on Thursday, and one of the recipients was Patricia Covington, a post office mistress in Steeple Morden, now retired, who made her post office into a community hub and did a lot of other things for the people of Steeple Morden. [She also proudly told me that her uncle played the organ in great St Mary's in the late 1940ies.] Since coming to GSM a year ago, I have attended three of these ceremonies, and I love hearing their commendations, the way they, people of all walks of life, make a huge difference to other people's lives by going the extra mile.

In our gospel reading this morning, we heard the parable of the talents – another rather puzzling parable in Matthew's gospel, which we can only understand if we pay attention to its context. It is the middle one of the last three parables in Mathhew's gospel, preceded by the parable of the 10 bridesmaids waiting for the groom at night. It is followed by last parable in Matthew's gospel, when Christ comes in his glory, and separates the sheep from the goats, the last judgement. It will be our gospel reading next week, on the feast of Christ the King.

These are parables about the kingdom of heaven and about being ready to meet Christ when he comes again – we don't know when that will be, but he will come again. We are reminded that one day we will have to give an account of how we have lived our lives; how we have responded to God's love and all that has been given to us.

I said it's a puzzling parable, because how many of us know that the 'talents' Jesus is talking about are referring to a monetary unit, used in Jesus' time? When we hear the parable, most of us think of 'talents' as our abilities to do things well – the way the 'talent' has come to be used in our language today. In Jesus' time – one talent was a huge amount of money = 6000 denarii, way beyond anything that Jesus' listeners would ever own – in the area of £1 mio pounds today.

So, when Jesus is describing the kingdom of heaven like a landowner who goes away and gives these extravagant amounts of money to his slaves or servants to look after and work with, we find ourselves with a depiction of God as one who has entrusted his servants with huge amounts of wealth and riches.

Thinking of the parable and God in this way, we have a much bigger horizon to think about the gift of talents. We are no longer just talking about individual endowment, but the stewardship of all that makes up our world. God has entrusted us with huge wealth.

We think about nature and our natural resources – the goodness and beauty entrusted to us. (If I want to watch something uplifting on the TV, I watch a nature program!).

We think about the society and the situations we are born into: not perfect, but there is a lot of good; whether that is our families, or local communities, our church, our access to education, to sports, to the arts. And, of, course, we are thinking about individual talents as well – that may equip us for a particular role, as teacher, doctor, carer, musician, parent; we may have a gift for friendship, for listening – for compassion and mercy.

Thinking about the parable in this way, enables us to realise that everyone is able to contribute, double their talents, especially when we are part of a caring church or local community; when we work together to look out for those in our society who are weak or vulnerable; when we are passionate about preserving our planet and bio diversity.

If we think of talents as the kingdom of God, God's gifts and God's love in our hearts; our faith to work in the kingdom against the odds, then today's parable is an invitation to ask ourselves: how are we living in the kingdom of God? For what the parable tells us is that the more we live out of the kingdom – all that puts 'love of God and of our neighbour' into practice – the more the kingdom takes care of itself. There is plenitude and abundance that cannot otherwise be realised. It is seeing the good rather than the negative and what's missing.

So, what about the man who received his talent – a million pounds which he decided to bury in the ground? I am struck he does the opposite of the man, who in an earlier parable in Matthew's gospel, found a treasure, hidden in a field, and sold all he had to buy the field and dig up the treasure.

What was going on for the man with the one talent? The landowner called him a wicked and lazy servant. What is it that prevents us from living in the kingdom working with our talents? Is it fear of getting things wrong? Is it indifference? Total self-preoccupation? Apathy? Greed? Laziness? Is it the inability to see that God is good and generous, merciful and always offering us life – even in the midst of loss and suffering.

There is an urgency in our bible readings at this time of the year, when the church calendar encourages us to engage with the reality of death and final judgement. The urgency reminds us that we have only one life and responsibility for the choices we make. Our lives here on earth are part of God's purposes for the world – we can choose to be part of God's kingdom already on earth. The sense of urgency is real – that's why we have seasons like Advent and Lent, to encourage us to make space to pray and reflect on our lives with God and others.

Our readings today invite us to hear the good news of God's generosity and kingdom among us; to welcome the good news of being part of a faith community where we don't have to do it all on our own; where we encourage each other and allow our talents to double. When our time comes, may we, too, hear the master's words "Well done, good and trustworthy slave ...enter into the joy of your master." Amen.