

Service 19th November 2023

Prayers of Approach

As we come before you today, gracious God, we bring to you what is yours:
our thanks, our praise, our hearts, our lives.
As we sing, as we celebrate, as we listen and as we pray,
bless each one of us with a sense of your presence
and the reassurance of your love.

Remind us of our gifts when we lose sight of them.

Show us where and how to share them.

Give us the courage to offer them freely, as you give to us.

What others may seek to destroy, help us to protect and care,

and give us the conviction to stand fast when we are called to do so.

This we ask of you, in Jesus' name.

Amen.

O Lord, we are so bad at taking risks.
cautious and careful rather than daring and decisive,
far more fearful than faithful.
Help us to look to your strength, not our own weaknesses,
to your riches, not our poverty –
that we may fulfil your hopes for us,
to your glory and our joy.

You give us so much, Lord,
trusting us more than we trust ourselves,
giving us more than we think we deserve,
blessing us with opportunities that we are slow to take.

Thank you for believing in us;
help us to believe in ourselves, in one another
and in you.

Amen.

Hymn *Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart* (R&S 489)

Readings: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

Introduction

Today's readings invite us to think about what it means to be faithful, what it is that God expects

of us and how we should respond. 'Are you complacent?' asks Zephaniah. 'Are you asleep?' asks Paul. 'Are you interested only in self-preservation?' asks Jesus.

All three readings involve speech and silence, although the issue is not speaking or keeping silence as such, but how we respond to God. In Zephaniah, the silence comes from the shock of the unexpected – things are not right, as people had assumed they were. In 1 Thessalonians, the people are encouraged to avoid complacency and to build up each other. In Matthew, speaking up and keeping silence are signs, or indicators, of two different responses to God: one focuses outwards, the other inwards; one demonstrates concern for all God's people, the other only self-preservation. Have you ever been trusted to look after something? What risks would you be prepared to take? Consider what you would say if God returned and demanded that we give an account of ourselves today.

Hymn *The Day of the Lord shall come as prophets have told* (R&S 637)

Sermon

Jesus tells a parable of a man who, before going away, gives his slaves talents (i.e. money). When he returns, he holds his slaves accountable for what they have done with the talents. Two have used them wisely, but one has done nothing – and is strongly condemned. God has given to us, as individuals and to the whole of humankind, such gifts. Yet often we ignore them, or are unaware of them, or, in the case of creation itself, destroy them. God asks us to nurture and share the gifts he has given, especially in the darkness that is war, climate change or injustice.

Let's just consider for a moment the effect of negative thinking. Think of the hole in the ground and imagine the thoughts and feelings of the third servant digging to bury the money. What was he so anxious about, what were his anxieties? Was he saying to himself: I can't possibly live up to the master's expectations; he doesn't like me as much as the others, it's not fair; I'm not really that good at anything; better hide it in case someone steals it. Do we recognise any of these anxieties in ourselves? What do we worry about that prevents us from taking action?

The posters for the film 'The Fly' proclaimed in bold dramatic letters, '**Be afraid, be very afraid!**' and we sometimes talk about being petrified by fear, people being so terrified that the fear paralyses them and they are momentarily 'turned to stone'. Zephaniah's prophecy was like that – so full of wrath, anguish, trouble and destruction, that the Day of the Lord becomes a terrifying prospect, one that has the potential to paralyse people's ability to act. Such shock tactics, like those used in anti-smoking and drink-driving ads on TV in recent years, however should not scare and 'petrify' us to the point of preventing change and taking action. Despite the harsh words the book of Zephaniah ends with words of hope and rejoicing, with God's promise that he will restore his humble and repentant people.

The serious words of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians too are tempered with the positive. The Day of the Lord shall come like 'a thief in the night' when we are least expecting it but that need not make us over-fearful since we are people of the light and our salvation comes through Jesus Christ, who died for us, and gives us the necessary protection. The Gospel reading too reminds us of this. The third servant lived in fear of his master's judgement but unnecessarily so. The master was not as grasping and unfair as the servant made out and proved to be very generous to the faithful servants who had used his 'seed' money well.

Does anxiety ever stop us doing good things? Ignoring our best intentions because we are worried what people will think of us is a bit like burying the money in the hole in the ground. What makes the first two servants able to respond so differently? What about us? We do have a choice between thinking negatively and blocking God's Spirit, or thinking positively and getting caught up in the life of the kingdom. What might support and determine our choices?

There is another way of looking at this tale. This is an odd parable! Jesus doesn't usually recommend using our energy to make lots of money. Perhaps it makes more sense if we recognise that the 'talents' are not 'money' as is generally supposed. We often interpret the parable as being about the 'gifts' we have been given by God – the things we are good at. But suppose the parable is meant ironically: the talents are money and this is the way the world works – if you have money, you

are likely to get more, if not, then you'll remain at the bottom of the heap. But this is not how the kingdom works and Jesus' followers must defy the ways of the world, no matter what it means for them. Following Jesus will make you neither rich nor popular. That would fit with Jesus' Jewish sense of humour!

***Hymn** Seek ye first the kingdom of God (R&S 512)*

Prayers of Intercession

As a church, we have been given many gifts, many talents, many opportunities, and so we pray:

Loving God, help us – individually, and as your people together –

to be your witnesses in the world today.

Help us to take risks and not stay in our comfort zones.

Bless us with the courage of your first disciples, that your kingdom may come and your will be done in this place and throughout the world.

We pray, loving God,
for all those who take risks in our world today:
for those who preach the gospel where it is dangerous to do so;
for those who speak out for justice though it could cost them their lives;
for those who denounce corruption though it costs them their livelihoods;
for those who stand up to temptation and turn down offers of riches;
for those called to be in the armed forces, the rescue services, the police force, and in any place of work where they risk their lives to save others.

Lord, bless their faithfulness, reward their courage, and receive our prayers.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

***Hymn** Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided (R&S 603)*

Blessing

May you flourish as you use your gifts.

May you grow in faith and wisdom.

may God bless your endeavours

And may 'Well done, good and faithful servant' be your joy to hear as you work, rest and pray, day by day.

Amen.

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