

Sermon for trinity 23 2020

*“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.”*

I have always been confused by this statement by our Lord. It almost comes across as a version of the prosperity Gospel. The prosperity gospel as a term attributed to a false teaching that if you believe in Jesus you will have good fortune and you will be financially rich. I cannot think of any passage in the new testament that would indicate Jesus' support of this argument. In fact, he comes across as being critical of the rich when he states that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven.

It seems that a contributing factor to exclusion from heaven is the love of money. Being rich in itself is not a problem, but, thinking that being rich excludes any need of God is a problem. Money in itself is neither evil nor good, but the love of money can lead us into all sorts of spiritual and temporal problems.

Perhaps this is why I have always had difficulty in understanding the account of the three men and their talents of money. At first glance it might appear to be instructing the people to concentrate on making money. The slave with five talents made five more. The man with three made three more. This means that they had a 100% return on their investment. The man with one talent who hid his money in the ground was condemned. Are you beginning to understand my confusion?

It is very apparent that the reading must mean something other than raising cash. In keeping with Our Lord's constant chastising of the Jews we could look to which lesson he might be offering this morning. If it is not specifically about money, then is it a lesson for the Pharisees who have been given a charge to make God known?

It is apparent that Jesus is critical of the Pharisees and they are in turn critical of Jesus. If we think of the businessman as representing God, and the slaves as being the Pharisees, and the talents as being a moral charge from God, the picture begins to clear.

God invests himself in the people he has chosen. There is no expectation of spectacular return, but it is expected that there will be some. The return of the people chosen by God is measured, not by who they are, but by whom they bring to the faith. Or perhaps more accurately, it is measured by one's enthusiasm and intention when speaking to others about God and the salvation we know to be the precious gift from God.

The character of interest is the slave who buries his talent in the ground. This is like a person of faith who never speaks of their faith. It is like a person who claims to be a person of faith who never prays, or worships God. The little faith that they have is never exercised in any way.

There is the old adage that says we are to “Use it or lose it!” Our faith is not exempt from this. If we were to stop praying, to stop worshipping, to stop regarding God as being in any way valuable in our day to day living, it would not take long before that little bit of faith

would erode and disappear. *“For those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”*

Now the slaves with the high returns begin to make sense. It is when we exercise our faith through prayer, worship, compassion, generosity of heart, truth, and passion that our faith will increase. The more our faith increases the more likely it is that God will lead us into new things, new responsibilities, new joys, new and refreshing belief in our God.

When we view this particular teaching as an exercise in faith its meaning becomes clearer. God acknowledges that those slaves who respond to God’s call will be rewarded in a special way, not with money. The slave who failed to respond to God has failed to nurture his faith, and will run the risk of never coming close to God. The imagery used by Jesus is the throwing of the slave into the outer darkness. We might think of this as being Hades.

To whom then is Jesus aiming this story? The answer is that the teaching is for the Pharisees. This does not mean that we cannot learn from it. The Pharisees have been called by God to give of themselves for the spiritual benefit of the people. They have been called by God to live their faith, and in doing so, to make God known. And Jesus has spoken to them in disparaging terms for they have failed in this task.

The Pharisees are accused of burying their faith in the ground to keep it safe. They have failed to make God known. They have failed to believe their own scriptures that state quite plainly the joy of the coming of the Messiah. They have failed to recognise that Jesus is the fulfilment of their own scriptures. They have failed to recognise God as God when he walked the earth among them.

These pharisees are the ones that Jesus is saying will be thrown into the outer darkness where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. The Greeks understood this to be Hades. We simply call it Hell. It is the absence of God.

Why was the slave so frightened that he hid his talent in the ground? Some might suggest that it was because his fear was generated by the understanding that God disapproved of people only interested in increasing wealth. Therefore, the slave was afraid of God. It was fear of God that stopped him from trading with his talent. As I have worked my way through this sermon I have come to think that this explanation is a little simplistic and could be used to justify a silent faith which has no impact on others, and even less on ourselves.

Our faith is within us, and our faith ensures that we will respond to God and that we respond to our neighbour. This is the fundamental command of God.