

2nd Sunday before Advent

I remember being confronted with today's parable in scripture class in the early years of primary school and being puzzled by the ending. It seemed to my childish self deeply unfair. Surely the poor servant who had kept the one Talent safe would at least be commended for that prudent conservation of this scarily valuable object, one Talent being equivalent to about 16 years' average wages – maybe £400,000 today. But he is abused and punished while the risk-takers are rewarded. I remember this, aged 7, as the first time my assumptions were challenged by the Gospel: it isn't about reinforcing our comfort-zone or what we think is common sense self-protection.

In translation the words of this parable create a potential confusion for English speakers. Because our word 'talent' refers not only to an ancient unit of currency but also to our innate abilities or developed skills, we instinctively conflate the two, but this coincidence of meaning is not there in Greek. This isn't about the difference in our intelligence or skills, things we can't change: on the contrary it is about changing our attitude to the potential that is in all of us. The only difference between the characters in the parable lies in their use of resources they've been given: the commended risk-takers have been given more, which is forgotten if this story is read as a modern talent contest. So, as always, I must look first to myself when I hear it. I need to examine my own instinctive caution and interrogate it against what has been given to *me*: am I doing my best to increase the value and reach of what I have received? How might I more effectively do that in the service of the Gospel? Am I an example of faith, hope, love, generosity and joy in my encounters with others? How might I, with patience and kindness, recall someone else to the realization that they are stifling the gift of God they have received (and therefore themselves) by hiding it away, refusing to act on it, allowing it to deteriorate beyond its use-by date.

S. Augustine writes in a reading set for today:

If you want to find the judge merciful, be merciful yourself before he comes. Forgive if anyone offends against you. Give from your riches. From whose riches do you give except from his. If you gave from your own riches it would be bounty, but if you give from his, it is only a repayment. For what do you have that you did not receive? The most pleasing sacrifices to God are mercy, humility, confession, peace, love. If we bring these to God we shall await without fear the coming of the judge who will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth.
[Discourse on Ps 95]

In his sermon for Michaelmas, published in the last Parish Paper, my friend Fr Daniel Dries spoke of the daily Angelus and the angelic Annunciation as 'divine interruptions'. We experience that sense of interruption afresh whenever we are brought up against something challenging in scripture, when we are reminded that we proclaim and seek to live out our faith in a God who does interrupt us rather than just leave us alone: the incarnation, Jesus becoming one of us, is the supreme divine interruption. We may dislike interruption, but this is an invitation, as the wedding banquet parables remind us, and requires a response.

As we sense Advent on the horizon we hear about some more interruption: this morning Zephaniah prophesies a coming Day of the Lord, interrupting the complacency of those who assume that God doesn't care what we do, who say 'the Lord will do nothing, neither good nor bad'. This is a sort of atheism familiar in our day: many who tell pollsters that they believe in God see him like this, but a God who does nothing is effectively not there; he is certainly not the interrupting deity of the Gospels. The beginning of Zephaniah's prophecy is a warning of terrifying judgement but that is not his last word. Two chapters later he concludes, 'the Lord will renew you in his love': the end of his short book is a joyful prophetic psalm of hope and restoration. Former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who died last weekend, would remind us that hope for the future, restoration and renewal, is a distinctive gift of Judaism to the Abrahamic faiths, born of Jewish experiences of exile: we believe that Jesus newly embodies that hope in the Resurrection, giving it personal force and meaning for Christians. The lesson is not to echo the strong language of condemnation (we all enjoy doing that a little too readily), but to listen to it and look to *ourselves*, with trust and hope in God that we can do better.

Looking through this lens at our second reading and our gospel we are reminded that the prophetic words of the New Testament about God's coming are not there to tell us *when* it will happen, but to recall us to a sense of urgency, a daily readiness to be in God's presence, prepared for that coming of the Lord that will be the Last Interruption. The prophets of both Testaments use bold images to impress on us the suddenness of the Lord's return. The day – that is the Lord – will come, S Paul says, 'like a thief in the night'. Jesus used the same strange image when he said that any householder who *knew* when the burglar was coming would be prepared. Our current interruption, the pandemic, is surely a good analogue of this: we weren't ready and it has woken us up to many things about ourselves. In our small corner here at All Saints it has radically interrupted a long-perpetuated daily pattern that was, in my view, both unsustainable and out of date and made us offer our worship in different ways that are essentially more outward looking. It is my prayer that this opportunity for re-set will prompt us to question who we are more generally as we move forward to a renewed future together.

Today's parable isn't investment advice: it is about how we view and embody the Church, its culture. Jesus proposes that we can *all* make the best use of what we have been given every day. Or we can sit on it and congratulate ourselves for having it. It is about our fundamental cast of mind, who we really are: are we in love with God or do we belong to a self-congratulation club. Do we seek to protect what we have to the extent that it becomes irrelevant to anyone else, or are we generous givers and sharers, of faith, hope and love, or whatever promotes them.