

Second Sunday before Advent 2020 (15.11.20)
Zephaniah 1: 7, 12 – end; Matthew 25: 14 – 30

Over the last 15 years or so we've been increasingly encouraged to keep these Sundays between All Saints and Advent as a mini-season called the Kingdom Season and to array the church in red for them. Before the Church of England gradually rolled out its Common Worship material in the years following the year 2000, these Sunday s were simply the last Sundays of Trinity Season and we arrayed the church in green.

Quiet apart from the preciousness of being able to float around in red, at a more substantive level this means that when we open up a piece of scripture, we don't come to it with entirely open minds, receptively waiting for whatever may come out of it and willing to go wherever it may take us. Rather, we look at a piece of scripture through the lens of the Kingdom Season. And, if you like, we bring to it an agenda which

enquires what sign of the Kingdom we can find in the passage. There's nothing wrong with this so long as we recognise what we're doing, do it with transparency and don't pretend that it's what's technically known as exegesis.

All of which is lucky for us, because otherwise this morning's passages would be quite difficult. In fact one scholar has said, "No parable has been more misused than Jesus' parable of the talents."¹ If we're not careful we could have been sent off, reinforcing that spiritually and psychologically crippling view of God, which anthropologically speaking has been a driving force of the religious impulse for millennia, that God is an angry being somewhere outside this world by whom we run the risk of being punished at the end of life in this world. That would certainly be the case if we lingered over the Zephaniah passage or,

¹ Hauerwas, S [2015] Matthew, in Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, Brazos Press Grand Rapids

indeed, the fate of the third slave in the parable of the talents.

Instead I want simply to look at the conduct of the first two slaves and to see what signs of the Kingdom in this world we might find.² But before we do that we need even more preamble. We mustn't think that this parable is an endorsement by Jesus of the practices of C21st hedge fund managers. That would go totally against the grain of the underlying biblical attitude towards wealth and possessions. The Bible bears witness to God's preferential option for the poor and insists that enterprise must be tempered with compassion and a concern for the marginalised and dispossessed. God's blessing is for those who operate with justice and righteousness, not for those who make a big buck.

² This approach is indebted to Byrne, B [2004] *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's gospel in the Church Today*, Liturgical Press Minnesota, although it doesn't slavishly follow him

When Jesus taught in parables he used things that resonate with everyday life in order to communicate effectively. The emphasis is on the effectiveness of the communication, not on the accuracy of the analogy. Jesus is not saying that an arena of unbridled capitalism is a technically accurate analogue for the operation of the Kingdom of Heaven. All he *is* doing is using a story from everyday life to arrest our attention and fire our imagination.

Now, we all know that often people have to be responsible for things on trust. When that happens, trustees have to be very cautious. They have to be able to demonstrate that they've used due diligence to preserve the trust's assets. But in this parable, the master who goes away isn't interested in preserving his assets. He's not bothered about getting his money back. When the third slave lets him down, he didn't take back from him the principal sum he had entrusted him with: he gave it to the other two. Did you notice that detail at the end of the story? The master isn't

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interested in profit. He's interested in whether his slaves can demonstrate the right attitude for promotion.

The first two slaves get this. They recognise that what the master has given them isn't on trust at all: it's a gift, a free gift, to be used freely and creatively. They don't need to fear their master and allow anxiety to cripple them into inaction. They can take risks and let their imaginations run riot.

And this is a parable of what it is like to live as a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. We see signs of the Kingdom in our midst when we see people living freely and imaginatively and creatively, taking risks for the Gospel; not crippled with anxiety about whether they're following the rules, being good enough, confirming to norms, doing what's expected of them.

Jesus hasn't entrusted us with five talents or two talents or one talent. He's entrusted us with a

manifesto committed to ending poverty and restriction and affliction. The message of the parable is to live out that manifesto with action and enterprise, even at the risk of being imprudent to the point of irresponsibility.