

**15<sup>th</sup> Nov 2020 - Second Sunday before Advent**

**Zephaniah 1.7, 12-end; Psalm 90: 1-8  
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matt 25:14-30**

Watch out! The thief comes when we're asleep!

Watch out! The bridegroom is here!

Watch out! 'How people use what is given to them in this life will determine their future destiny', is the message of the today's parable!

What is Jesus preparing people for when he used these images? Maybe he used them as they struck a chord in the heart: keep your house safe, keep your lamps lit, know your 'self' because your spiritual life and wellbeing remain firmly in your own hands. Be prepared to become vulnerable.

This is hard to hear because becoming vulnerable is a quality we tend to avoid; a spiritual quality we may veer away from. It's only when life's circumstances, over which we have no control, rise up to meet us that we start to feel panicky and overwhelmed. But, add to this mix the Pandemic, Brexit and events in far-away places and, collectively as well as individually, we begin to experience a new level of vulnerability... which feels very strange indeed.

There is an antidote however...

In Paul's words to the Thessalonian Christians he wrote that nothing should surprise us because we are 'in Christ'. We already wear '*the breastplate of faith and love*' and the '*helmet, the hope of salvation.*' Paul reminds us that collective Christian destiny is determined by how we individually use what God has given us. This is not determined by material values or the twists, turns and chances of life, in any era or season.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks died last week – I loved him, his voice, his wisdom and his innate search for peace and reconciliation. These were his words: 'People **not** like us make us grow.' I wrote the phrase on my phone so I wouldn't forget it; guess what predictive text wrote? 'People not like us make us frown!' I laughed but understood the paradox. Maybe it is helpful to think of Jesus asking us if we want to grow or to frown? Whichever one we choose invites us to a different place of vulnerability. So, watch out! We can either grow or frown after hearing the Parable of the Talents.

The Author named Matthew wrote his Gospel, because he was excited about Jesus. As a trained scribe, he went to great lengths to explain how Jesus was God's plan to forward, not delete, the Torah and the Prophets. Matthew knew Jewish objections to Christianity well as he was living in times of conflict

and persecution for the young Church. He had seen Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and reflected on what the collective Jewish nation had been given by God, how they had squandered it and ignored the trust placed in them, especially in the way they had treated Jesus.

To Jesus' listeners the master in the parable was God and Israel, the slaves. God had given Israel the Torah and the Prophets so the whole world would come to know God's promises, blessings and favours. Israel had failed to reveal these promises, blessings and favours to the poor, the needy, the sick; to widows and orphans. Israel, then, was the worthless slave and its collective punishment was the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple which signalled God leaving the building, so to speak.

A talent was not a coin but a large sum of money; enough for investment in a capital project; about the wages of a labourer for 15 years. Knowing this helped me understand the parable because I couldn't work out why the slave who hid the money and returned it unused was in such trouble. I also thought he had shown astute understanding of his Master's nature, until I reflected on his individual action and came to see that he was judgemental, self-satisfied and lacked thought for his neighbour and those in need, exactly those to whom Jesus had directed the parable. So, the

message remains, 'How we use what is given to us in this life will determine our future destiny' which, according to Matthew, is imminent! Are you growing or frowning?

Two Sundays ago, I heard that Bobby Ball [one half of Cannon and Ball] had died. A Theatre Chaplain told listeners about an occasion he had thanked the pair for their evening performance. Bobby asked the Chaplain if he was prepared to take off his collar and join him for a bevy in the pub. During conversation, the Chaplain asked Bobby if he had everything he wanted. 'Yes! he said, he did. A few days later, Bobby contacted the Chaplain and said that although he had every material thing, what he really wanted was the peace the Chaplain had. Where could he get it? The Chaplain told Bobby his peace came from God. That's what Bobby wanted so he accepted the vulnerability of becoming a disciple of Jesus and started to use what life had given him in the light of God's Peace thereby turning his frown into a growth spurt.

Let's pray, today's Collect... Merciful God, resisting the iron fist that reaps where it did not sow: give us courage to accept your faith in us and compassion to stand with all who are cast aside; through Jesus Christ, who became nothing that we might have everything. Amen.