

Year A, Second before Advent, 19 November 2023

Zephaniah 1.7,12-end; Psalm 90.1-8; 1 Thess. 5.1-11; Matthew 25.14-30

Yesterday a group of not quite twenty persons gathered for a study day/workshop on understanding death in the light of the resurrection. The day included an introduction to funeral services with or without Holy Communion. The idea for the day originated with Lucille having lobbied the chaplain for some years. Lucille should you not know is my wife. For some time she was of the mind that there ought to be a workshop on planning your funeral, so that when the time comes “to be taken” we have not only prepared our wills and who gets what, but how Christian funerals should look and feel. The message they should convey. It is providential having spoken about death yesterday there should be a baptism here today and when it comes to the baptism service, we will be reminded that we have already died having been born to eternal life. Something many Christians still don't grasp this foundational truth and what it means for giving “gestalt” to our lives.

Today Matthew, one of the four Evangelists has us focus on the Parable of the Talents. Last week we heard the Parable of the Ten Wise and Foolish Virgins. (Matthew 25:14–30) Both parables come immediately one after another towards the end of Matthew's gospel. These parables are told according to Matthew in the last days of Jesus' public ministry in Jerusalem before his arrest, passion and death. One of the things these two parables have in common is that they speak about absence and what should be taking place during the absence. The absence of our Lord post Ascension. There is the absence of the bridegroom who is delayed and there the absence of

the master who has given talents to each servant to use wisely, while he is absent having gone on a journey.

And we ask ourselves has there ever been such a journey as the one that Jesus has been on? If this journey were one-dimensional meaning only human, only of this world, it would still inspire some possibly many. It has a quality. It has a quality that is edifying but it is also highly disruptive, just as it is disruptive in our lives today. However, Jesus' journey is not only human. And Matthew makes this point subtly by how he begins and ends his gospel. He begins his gospel with a genealogy marking the human. Jesus like you and me has a genealogy and his carries some weight. The genealogy is followed by Mary being found pregnant with a child from the Holy Spirit prompting Joseph to want and end the betrothal quietly – only then for **an angel** to appear to Joseph in a dream. An angel who intervenes informing him what has happened. Two times more the angel appears to Joseph first warning him of the threat Herod poses and years later informing him that it is safe to return to Nazareth possibly via the coastal road that would have taken him along the Gaza Strip. “You will hear of wars and rumours of wars”. A painfully relevant prophecy.

Who is Herod today we will ask. He who killed the innocent babes because the threat he perceived this child to be, his birth made known to the Magi (the wise men) by a star appearing in the East. How does Herod manifest himself today? In who does Herod manifest himself. Today's Herods are legion and not restricted to persons. The threefold appearing of the angel to Joseph at the beginning of Matthew's gospel once Jesus' pedigree has been

established by a telling genealogy will lead to Matthew's gospel being identified with an angel. The angel represents the vertical level. This angel will reappear during the Temptations and then again at the end in the resurrection at the empty tomb.

... the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.'

I hope the above helps somewhat in establishing the perspective from which Matthew tells the story of Jesus' public life, and being reminded of it how to interpret the two parables mentioned. The virgins wait. Today Christians wait. We do not know the hour or the day, but we are to be ready to welcome God when he comes not only in the distant future, but when God meets us in the everyday. There is a posture to cultivate. Es gibt eine Haltung zu gestalten. There is no room for slackers. And today's parable using money for the word picture is that we are to invest. What are we to invest you may ask yourself? We are to invest our very selves as Jesus invested his very self. A tall order for sure! It is in Matthew's gospel we hear Jesus speak the words: your reward in heaven is great if you invest yourself in his service. The time we are given – the Psalmist says "the days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years" – our time is to be used well. It is to be used in the service of God's kingdom with a different set of values as Jesus makes clear in the Sermon

on the Mount. An investment always carries a risk. Those who have invested their five and two talents respectively both make a good return.

The man who does not invest is the odd one out. He claims to know the master to be a harsh man. He accuses the master of “reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid...” What does the servant do? He hides the one talent he is given and on the Master’s return thrusts it back saying, “Here, you have what is yours.”

In the divine economy which is what ultimately sheds light on Jesus’ public ministry in Matthew’s gospel – think of the beginning and the end of the gospel, but also the multiplication of loaves – the Good News of Jesus is set within a larger framework namely that of the eternal, which so often seems elusive or impenetrable to one-dimensional views of life, resulting in many being unprepared or unwilling to give of themselves, but not so for the Evangelists nor we hope for ourselves. I was tempted to use the word risk and then to qualify it, but the parable is told not to discourage but to encourage us to give of ourselves trusting for it is good for each of us to hear these words spoken,

“Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

It is one of life’s lessons “leider” that those who prove themselves trustworthy are put in charge of more things and even many things. And it is a reward that carries within it the weight of responsibility a responsibility that is anchored in this life. It is the reward of those are who are known by God and

know God. Today's parable contrasts with last week's where the final words are "Truly I tell you; I do not know you." Unmasking those who do not see their lives in relationship with God, who have exchanged the vertical for the one-dimensional view of things. God emptied. Gott geleert. Nicht Gott durchdrungen. Not God permeated.

There is no doubt in my mind that these two parables are told to serve as warnings helping us to see our lives set within eternity, while at the same time taking the here and now absolutely seriously. In God's economy the eternal impacts on the present and vice versa. Here we are called to prove ourselves as faithful servants of the Master.

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