

**Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> November 2017**  
**2 before Advent (A)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

OT: Zephaniah 1.7,12-18  
NT: 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11  
Gp: Matthew 25.14-30

What is your role within your community? Or communities? Each of us lives in relation to others, and whether we call those around us family or friends or community, we all (to some extent) share our lives with others. And we all have our own roles. For example, there are certain things which I do at home, and certain things which I do not do. These roles are not always chosen to be the things that I like doing, but rather that there are tasks to be done and roles to be assumed, and the harmony of living together means that they are assigned fairly. I do most of the cooking at home, but I am not the one who compiles the shopping list. If a new book comes into the house, then it is my responsibility to assign it a place on the bookshelf, but if I need to make a train journey then it is usually my wife who buys the train ticket for me. There are responsibilities which each of us take on.

And on the face of it our Gospel passage is about taking responsibility, but I think we need to peel back to layers and have a more sophisticated look at it. Jesus' story is about the man who entrusts different amounts of money to his slaves, and he rewards the slaves who produce profit on the initial investment, and he condemns the slave who returns what he has been given without any increment. This is not an endorsement of the effectiveness of markets within a capitalist economy, but it is about responsibility. God has entrusted us with gifts and resources, and it is our responsibility to use those for fruition. Like the slaves in the story, each of us is given different gifts and resources, but each of us has an opportunity to use them.

Like so many biblical parables, we could just stop there, but if we did then we could pick holes in it. Most obviously, the capacity to use resources is undermined by context and situation. The 'get on your bike' attitude of the 1980s we should perhaps now recognize as being the product of privilege. We are surrounded by people who are not able to exercise the use of their resources because of the desperation of their situation. If you are living with debt or with domestic violence or with abuse or severe health issues, then keeping life

together for 24 hours is enough of a challenge, without expanding the Kingdom further. This is why I should like to suggest that understanding this parable as an injunction to individuals would reflect the mindset of a previous age, and that as we continue to mature intellectually and emotionally we need to understand the parable in a new way.

Responsibility within community is never about individualism. The paradigm of the Holy Trinity, so often overlooked, tells us again and again that just as God is interdependent in love and movement between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so human community can never be addressed to individuals. A friend of mine in a religious community speaks of the responsibility of the Common Life, which is not about doing things for others, but with others. This is nuanced, because if you have a task within community, it is important to be allowed to complete it. If it is your job to take the bins out, then it is not helpful if someone else, with good intentions, puts the bins out before you have a chance to do so. This undermines you, or it implies that the task is not important, and you yourself might feel you don't need to bother next week, or it implies a lack of trust that you will do it. So we must not trivialize the roles which each of us play within community. The Father is not complete without the Son or the Holy Spirit. I am not complete without you. You are not complete without me.

Our second reading, from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, is a much more individually-focused message. He tells us in a series of images about God's judgement being unexpected: like the thief, like the coming of labour pains, the unexpected will come. But it's all right, he says, if you are aware of this. You know what is coming, he tells the community of Christians in Thessalonica. This is the theme which links the letter with the Gospel passage: the coming of God to judge. And although I have spoken about the bigger picture of responsibility within community, Paul's letter is a useful reminder that he is specifically talking about you; he is specifically talking about me. What are you going to do? What am I going to do?

I have explored the model for living within community, but let us peel back the layer further and talk about a city, national or global community. What the Christian Gospel gives us is not instruction, but an interpretation of human society and a picture of how things should be. On the whole, those of us here today are affluent: not just financially, but also in terms

of the cultural context in which we live. In global terms, everyone here is affluent. What the final slave in our Gospel story failed to do was to take his part in the community in which he lived. There are four characters in the story: the master and three slaves. Only one of them stepped outside that community and ignored his role. This is probably not how we would have interpreted this passage 30 years ago, but our society has changed.

Let us think about those responsibilities within community. As the story tells us, we do not all have equal resources. We are not told to disempower our neighbours, but the greater our resources, the greater our responsibilities. When the master returned, he said to the first slave: “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things.” Responsibility towards others actually implies equality with others, because we must respect their participation in the community. The tension is what I have said earlier, that there are those who are not able to cope now, let alone contribute more. But the model of community given by these four characters is that we are all equal participants until we choose not to take part. The third slave chose not to take part. My neighbour who is selling sex on the streets to support children or pay debts, my neighbour who is turning up at St Vincent’s or St Bride’s every week to collect food which we have donated here at St Nick’s – these people have not opted out of community: they are playing their part within their resources. They are my equals – your equals – within our community. Each participating.

The condemnation in the Gospel is for those who back out; those who walk away from their responsibilities for those around them. For us these are both local – in the way we live with our families, friends and colleagues – and also national and global – in the way we behave towards the individuals we never see. This is, I think, a difficult Gospel because it feels as if it is about success and failure, about performing well. My interpretation is about participation, and it is modelled on the interdependence of the Trinity. In our story, there were four characters. One of them walked away. Don’t let it be you.

*Fr Crispin Pailing*