

Sunday 19th November 2023
Second Sunday before Advent (A)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Zephaniah 1.7,12-18

NT: I Thessalonians 5.1-11

Gp: Matthew 25.14-30

I'll let you into a secret: like many others, I have a small but unchanging supply of sermons for baptisms and weddings. They are often preached with variations to fit the family, but the core is the same. When I was first ordained I worked out an interactive sermon for baptism where I asked the congregation how they felt when they got out of the bath or shower. The predictable answers were normally delivered along the lines of 'clean' or 'refreshed', which would then allow me to talk about baptismal grace and the wiping away of sin. On one occasion I asked the congregation how they felt when they got out of the bath, and a man from the back shouted out, "Randy!" This was, of course, the end of that interactive ploy. And so the next incarnation of the sermon began with me asking what the people on the checkouts at the supermarket say to their customers. There were less dangerous pitfalls with this, as the typical answers were, 'do you want help packing?' or 'what are you doing on the weekend?' whereas the answer I really wanted was "Have you got a reward card?"

Now, the point of this question is to illustrate how everything is transactional these days. It is straightforward to go to a shop and say that in return for money you get food, but the advent of the reward card has created an additional layer of transaction, where the shop gives you an additional bonus for bringing your business to them. I suppose, in a funny sort of way, you could even say that sitting through a sermon is the price that a family pays for bringing a child for baptism in a church. But, of course, the point of my sermon is that, unlike supermarkets, there is nothing really transactional about baptism. God's grace is free and we do not have to do anything to earn it.

Today's Gospel reading is a challenge to that proposition. The parable of the talents challenges us with its language, as it talks of slaves and throwing people into outer darkness. In the past I have examined that language more closely, and also noted that the parable is an invitation to use the gifts which God has given us, but the passage is also very transactional: the first two slaves do something with the money with which they have been entrusted, and they are rewarded for it; the third slave just hangs on to it and does very little, and so he is "thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing

of teeth.” This always seems a little harsh to me, but it is a doctrine preached by many. It is linked to the rather unpleasant ‘prosperity gospel’ which is preached by some evangelicals, but is in fact implicit in a lot of evangelical theology. In fact it is borne out in the rather crude understanding of prayer which says that if you pray hard enough for something then you will receive it, and therefore conversely that if you do not receive it then you have not prayed hard enough, or there is possibly some other impediment to receiving it which is a direct result of your behaviour.

Those of you unfortunate enough to have followed the Church of England’s General Synod debates this week will have seen the institutional homophobia of the church promoted and encouraged by individuals who, quite apart from condemning fellow Christians as sinful, genuinely believe that if they do not fight for continuing discrimination then their own salvation is imperilled by the association with sin. It is absurd, but the principal reasons why some people cannot live with diverse views within the church are firstly that they personally hold homophobic views, and secondly that they believe that they personally will be the collateral damage for the church taking a course of action which they perceive as sinful.

Ironically, those who hold discriminatory theologies are also likely to resist the doctrine of justification by works, which suggests that the deeds we do have as much bearing on our personal salvation as the faith we hold. Surely, for those who condemn others in this way, their own faith is the only means of salvation they require. In a similar way, the fifth century British theologian Pelagius was condemned as an heretic because of his proposition that salvation can be earned. This we reject.

All of this brings us back to our Gospel passage, and the implication that God rewards certain behaviours – and just note that the passage is not about condemning but rather rewarding behaviours. This doesn’t actually make sense if we believe in the indiscriminate generosity of God, whose grace is given freely in the world. Grace is available to all equally, and this is the principal teaching in the Gospels of the universality of love. When we look at our Old Testament reading from the prophet Zephaniah, which is complemented by the reading from the Second Letter to the Thessalonians, we get a rather terrifying image of the coming of the Lord. We can see why the three readings have been put together, but they are not comfortable bedfellows. The reading from Zephaniah is a deeply political passage, talking about judgement coming on Judah when it was approaching its subjugation by the Babylonians,

and it is not about personal culpability but rather the collective errors of the worshippers of Yahweh. The Lord speaks through the prophet, saying, “I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.’” But this is before the final revelation of God’s love in Jesus Christ, when we see that judgement is tempered by grace, for God wills the salvation of all.

Today we say goodbye to Tabitha as she heads off to be Team Vicar in the Warrington East Team Ministry. It is always sad to see someone disappear from our midst, but it is also great to see a new opportunity for preaching the generosity of God’s grace, and for showing the indiscriminate nature of his love. Tabitha’s ministry, and the ministry which we all share, must be one of inclusive love, because this is the cause and the consequence of God coming amongst us in Jesus Christ. There is much that we can understand from today’s Gospel passage about the opportunities we have to use God’s gifts to us. Each of us has been given an investment of talents and it is up to us to use them wisely, but the Gospel reading does not show us the fundamental gift which Tabitha is called to show the people in her new parish, and we are called to show the people around us here in Liverpool, that God’s love is for everyone and – more importantly – that we are defined by his love. Those who discriminate against others forget that our very being is a product of that love, and so to reject the identity of someone is to reject God himself. The third slave in today’s passage was condemned for not using the investment wisely, but in fact we are condemned only when we reject God’s love and his creation. Shouting that love, and the glory of humanity created in that love, is Tabitha’s task in her new parish, and it is ours in our ministry. For us all, it is both a challenge and a privilege.

Fr Crispin Pailing