

**Laggan and Newtonmore
Parish Church of Scotland
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Jesus the Challenger Part 3
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Genesis 18:1-16

Luke 12:35-48

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required. Now there's a challenging statement and the focus of our thinking this week as we look at the way that Jesus challenges his disciples to be more like him.

One of the lovely things about the challenges that Jesus gives his followers is that they always come with gentleness and with the promise of help. So today's challenge begins as a delightful picture of a home lit up and waiting for the owner to return. The owner has been to a wedding, and you never know when they might end – especially in the Middle East. Usually the servants would head off to bed and leave things for the Master, but you wouldn't leave an untended oil lamp burning, and because they love their master, they don't want to think of him arriving in the dark. And then they want to make sure he is comfortable and has all he needs. So they wait, keeping things ready and doing what they know he would like. You can picture the house glowing with lights in the window as the master approaches in the wee small hours. And when that master does return, he is so delighted at the attentiveness and devotion of his servants that instead of letting them serve him, he turns the tables and insists on serving them.

A delightful picture, and a picture of what Jesus wants to do for us, if we will be those attentive servants, acting out of love for him. He wants to always find us doing what will please him, not just what we have to do, but what we want to do for love of him, and when we do, we find that as much as we can do for him, he does far more for us. And to highlight the point, Jesus briefly reminds us of what the servants were really for: to stop the house being broken

into. They have done their job and more than their job and he is delighted and serves them.

If only Jesus could have left it there, it would hardly be a challenge at all! But then Peter speaks up. By now, with that crowd, pushing around, and with Jesus turning from time to time from the disciples to the wider group, Peter seems to be getting confused, and in fact who could blame him. Reading the gospel we can go back and check who Jesus is talking to at any point, but Peter is there in the thick of it, and I don't expect that Jesus was talking in perfect silence! So Peter asks "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?"

There is something else behind Peter's question, perhaps. Stories about masters and servants were not uncommon in Jewish teaching and they usually referred to God (the master) and the nation (the servants). So was this teaching of Jesus for the whole nation, represented by the crowd, or just for those who followed Jesus closely? I suppose that in our own terms we might ask if this was for all of us or just for the Minister or the Kirk Session? Peter wasn't trying to get out of meeting the challenge, he knew it was going to apply to him, but he wanted to know who else it applied to.

Why did he want to know that? We don't know of course, but I can think of two reasons, one admirable, and one less so. The admirable reason would be so that he and his fellow-disciples could know to whom they might look to find allies in serving God the Jesus way. It is always good to know who is going to help us. The other reason might be that he wanted to know if he could say "Well, at least I am doing it better than they are!" We humans are so competitive, and too often like to justify our imperfections by finding someone who is even less perfect, at least in our eyes.

Jesus doesn't answer the question directly. Instead he goes on to extend the metaphor, almost to breaking point. He talks of the good employee who is put in charge of others and how he will do things well – decently and in order as we Presbyterians like to say. And then he contrasts that with the lazy manager who doesn't care for those under him or her and who doesn't do what is expected because the master is away and when the cat's away the mouse will play. The talk of beating is, I think, more a reference to how masters in Jesus' day might behave in the face of bad service rather than a reference to what we can expect at the hands of God – I did say the metaphor was pushed to breaking point. But then Jesus gets to the nub of the matter and the challenge which echoes down the years to us:

From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required, and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.”

Peter asked about who were to be these servants, always ready, and whom the master would serve. Jesus doesn't answer in terms of groups. But he talks about those to whom much is given. The crowd is given much but no one is given more than Jesus' disciples. No one is given more than those who are allowed to be with Jesus and serve him. No one is given more than we are.

“God so loved the world,” said John, “that he gave his only Son...” The reason that we make such a big fuss about Christmas – remember Christmas – just over a month ago? – is not because it is a cute story about a baby being born in a stable. It is because it is the story of God giving us himself. The reason that Holy Week and Easter are such a big deal is that God completes the gift of himself by taking our death and opening to us his own life. There is no more that God could give us than what he gave us in Jesus.

So whoever else Jesus' words refer to, or don't refer to, they certainly refer to us, to we who have received the most that can be given, in receiving Jesus as our Lord and Master, as our Saviour and brother and friend, and through him receiving a welcome into God's family and access to his glorious presence at all times. We certainly are those to whom much is given. The challenge then is that much is asked of us. We are asked to be those who are always ready, always making a welcome for our master, always living as God would want, even if we feel that he is away and we are unnoticed.

What does it mean to live making a welcome for God, or for Jesus? There is more than one way we can look at it. There have been those who have said that this means that each of us should make our hearts a warm and welcoming home for Jesus. And this is true. We cannot be disciples of Jesus if we do not want him in our lives, if we do not follow him out of love, not just duty. The servants who made the house light and welcoming for the master went above their duty out of love and respect, and we who have been given much should surely also love the one who gives to us and *want* to follow and please him. Welcoming Jesus into our hearts, living for the love of God is the beginning of our making a welcome.

It is the beginning, but if it is all we do, then our faith becomes a private piety and God's kingdom is not advanced very far in the world. You see, God comes to us in many ways. We read of the story of the promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a Son. In that story we, the readers, are told that it

was God who came to Abraham that day, but it is obvious that Abraham took the men who came as travellers passing by. However, desert hospitality made him welcome them and provide for them and so he was able to receive God's promise, which made Sarah laugh. It is the writer to the Hebrews who instructs us not to neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing this many have found that they are entertaining angels unawares. (Hebrews 13:2)

If the beginning of making a welcome for God means living for love of him, then part of the outworking of that is to live making others welcome – welcome in our homes and our church, welcome in our lives. We are called to friendliness, because in each person who comes our way, we can see the image of God. As with any of Jesus' challenges, that is easier to say than to do. It is easier to say that everyone bears the image of God, but not always easy to remember that when putting yourself out for someone is inconvenient to you. Or when someone is less than pleasant to you or is not grateful for what you do for them.

It is when things are difficult that we need to remind ourselves that although it looks like we are serving this person in front of us, we know that really we are serving Jesus who said that he comes to us in those who are hungry and thirsty and poor and ill-clothed and ill-housed and lonely and ill – remember the parable of the sheep and the goats? This wouldn't be a challenge if it were always going to be easy to do. But Jesus needs us to live lives which are consistent – that's the big challenge, remember - and part of that means living the welcome we give to Jesus so that others can see and know and enjoy it.

And there is a promise: when we do this, living the lives God asks of us, giving the welcome, serving our Lord, then he will commend and serve us. And we know that this is true, for this is what Jesus did for his friends at the last supper. This is what Jesus did for us in the incarnation and on the cross and through the empty tomb. This is what many of us have found as we entertain angels unawares, that in them Jesus comes and gives to us, far more than we are giving to others.

Much has been given to us. Much love, much care, much reaching, the best example. We would be nothing short of ungrateful if we did not in love seek to give much back to our God and pass his love forward to those around us.