

ORPHIR and STENNESS CHURCH
Sunday 19th November 2023; Proper 28A
Morning Service 1100
Transcript

Welcome and Intimations

Good morning. Wherever you come from today, whether you come regularly, or occasionally, perhaps even for the first time, you are welcome to our worship. Your presence enriches us in this time of celebration together.

Gathering Words and Prayer

Today we think about the parable of the talents and what it means for us; about the choices we face every day about how to live our lives; and about how to deal with the temptation to think negatively.

Let us take a moment to settle ourselves and to know that God is here with us

Pause

Today, God summons us, invites us, calls us, to bring to him our joys and our sorrows, our successes and failures. We lay open our hearts, our hands, our lives to his judgement and mercy and love. Our trust is in the Lord, who puts his trust in us. Amen.

Call to worship

Be children of light. Be children of day.

Come now and worship. Come now and pray.

United in our Christian fellowship, we join our voices with the whole church, across the world and across time.

Let us worship God:

Hymn 189 Be still, for the presence of the Lord

Opening Prayer and Lord's Prayer:

As we meet together in the presence of God this morning,
we gather our thoughts, and reflect on these past days.

We bring to mind something that has filled us with praise,
with wonder. and with awe this week:

maybe the promise in a sunrise, or the glow of a sunset;

maybe the comfort of a coffee, or a cup of tea; perhaps the sound of a friendly voice.

Whatever has caught our eye, perhaps made us catch our breath,
we allow it to fill our hearts with praise, with gratitude and adoration,
for our God, Ever-Present around us.

Those things that have worried us, caused us sadness, or frustration,
we allow these also to come to our minds and our hearts:

concern for family or friends;

events or incidents that have depleted our joy, drained our hearts of praise.

We bring those to God, knowing that he meets us here, in the reality of life.

For that also, we are grateful, to the God, in whom we live, and move, and have our being.

We give thanks that God is present with us in this time of worship;
that he meets each one of us at our point of need,
and we seek his blessing as we gather in his name,
Creator, Son and Holy Spirit, the same, yesterday, today and forever,
and as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught us:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Readings: *Liz will read for us today:*

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; NRSVA:

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Amen

Contemporary Reading:

In his book *Power for Life*, David Preston Sharp writes:

Question: God how would you have me be of service today?

Reply:

Today, do the work that your soul calls you to do.

Move forward with the lifework you know you are here for.

Remember that your work benefits and blesses others.

Remember also that you have been blessed by the efforts, work, and life callings of others.

Be confident that I will accomplish my work through you.

Be excited for your chosen work. Do it with grace and appreciation.

Infuse it with love and light, and give it to the world.

Hymn (2): 351 Jesus' hands were kind hands

Liz will read now from St. Matthew's Gospel:

Gospel Reading: Matthew 25:14-30 (NRSVA):

The Parable of the Talents

'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "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." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "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." Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Message

The story of the Talents is another one of Jesus's parables, these spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment stories, meant to have one immediate, powerful straight between the eyes point. Our first impression is that this parable was intended to draw attention to the useless servant, but there are other lessons that come to us as we reflect on what seems a straight-forward story.

Jesus has been talking about the need to be ready for the return of the Son of Man. We must all be ready. As our Thessalonians reading tells us, "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night". *Be ready!*". Jesus has already told us '*But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father, (Matt 24: 36)*, so there's no point in speculating about it.

Some things about this parable remind me of the examinations we all experience throughout our education, and, in particular, our Finals: assessments that may determine the course of our future life. It would be easy to look at Christianity as a kind of heavenly exam system, culminating in a decision as to who passes and who fails, who gets in and who doesn't. But Jesus made it clear that he came not to call the righteous but the sinners to repentance. He is warning the Scribes and the Pharisees – the religious hierarchy – that the tax collectors and prostitutes – the folk they see as failures in life – would be going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of them! Reactionary stuff!

The story about the master leaving his slaves jobs to do while he goes away, and evaluating them when he returns, would have made Jesus's first listeners think immediately about the relationship between God and Israel. Jesus is getting at the Scribes and the Pharisees. They have been given the Talents – the Law, and the Temple, together with promises that God will bless Israel, and through Israel, will bless the whole world. But, in effect, they have buried them in the ground. Instead of being the light of the world, they've tried to keep the light for themselves. They had been worthless slaves, and the threatened destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple was the punishment on the servants who had not done God's will. Just as the useless servant kept the talent buried in the ground, ready to hand it back to the Master exactly as it was, so the whole aim of the Scribes and Pharisees was to keep the law unchanged – "*to build a fence around the Law*", as they themselves put it. No change. No development. Nothing new: determined to keep things exactly as they were, with themselves administering it, calling the shots. The 'aye been...' folk. For that they were condemned.

Do you know anybody like that? I certainly do. I met a lot of them in my previous career, and I have met a lot of them in the church too.

At first the story seems all about the unworthy slave and his failure to use his Talent (a Talent, by the way, was the equivalent of 15 years' wages for a labourer, so that first servant received the equivalent of a lifetime's wages.). It's a warning to us to employ our talents –

talents of a different kind, in the service of the Master. Fine: but what about the first two, the guys who *did* what was expected of them?

These are the ones who respond to the call of Jesus, who take up what had already been given to Israel, and develop it into something new. They are like the mustard seed that starts small, and grows large, the beginnings of God's Kingdom. Jesus has come to bring the final confrontation between God's kingdom and the corrupt '*domination system*' that ensured that more than half of the wealth from agricultural production went to the ruling classes through taxation and exploitation. Those who are loyal to Jesus will be like those who made wise use of the money entrusted to them.

Yes, God certainly does want people to make wise use of the gifts they have been given, and there will indeed be a reckoning. We may not like that idea, but, as Paul warns the Corinthians, "*All of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Cor5:10).*" We are taught to understand that God is eternal and unchanging: 'I the Lord do not change' (Mal. 3; 6); 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever'. (*Hebrews 13:8, NCV*)

God is unchanging, but our understanding of God, and of Creation, and of the teachings of Jesus – all these change, and mature, and develop. We need to remember that this parable, and others like it, do not give us a complete picture of the creator God, the maker and lover of the world, the God who sent Jesus as the personal expression of his love, the God who '*so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*'. (Wright 139). The Son who came to bring life—life in all its fullness. The parable gives us only a glimpse of one aspect of God. This parable comes towards the end of an even greater story that is coming rapidly towards its climax: the time when the Son of Man will give his life as a ransom for many. (*Matt. 20:28*).

Lots of lessons in this parable. Where are we to go with it? Start with the obvious: **God gives us all different Talents.**

For us, although not for the original hearers, the word talent has a double meaning. Note carefully: *that was not the intention* – but it is a happy coincidence that in our language we think of *talents* as special aptitudes or skills. We have all been given talents, and we are all different. But, just as the servants were not actually *given* the talents, but rather *entrusted with them*, the time will come when we have to render account. How have we used our talents?

We are not all equal in the talents we have been given, but we can – we must – be equal in effort. The servant who was punished was the one who didn't try. He didn't lose his talent - he just didn't *try* to do anything with it. Even if he had tried, and had failed, it would have been better than doing nothing at all. A lesson here for those who undervalue themselves: for those who say, 'For all the difference I can make, it is not worthwhile even to try'.

The two servants who had done well – the good guys - were not told to sit back and take things easy. They were "*put in charge of many things*". They were given greater tasks and greater responsibilities.

The reward of work well done is more work to do!

Lots of lessons. What's the bottom line? The take-home message?

We must use our talents to the very utmost, in productive work for the Master, whether directly in his service, or, more likely, in service to our neighbour and we must be ready to give an account of how we have used them.

If our talents are used, they grow. If they are not used, they don't. It is the same with our faith: it does not deepen if we allow it to stagnate.

The Master expects us to be ready for his return, but he wants more than just sitting around waiting. He expects us to be doing something productive while he is gone.

We all struggle throughout our life for whatever cause or motivation seems right to each one of us: for money, or recognition, or fame, or status – **or** for the satisfaction of a job well done, helping others. Doing good. Doing the work of Jesus. But how do we do that in our present circumstances?

We can give some support to people among us who are having a bad time; those who are ill; who have lost a loved-one; the vulnerable, the housebound. Human contact: show we care; a phone call; would you like me to call in by? Shopping for somebody else as well as ourselves. Transport to the shops, or the Kirk, or the café. The needs are there, but we may have to look for them.

What's in it for us? At the end of the day, there is only one reward, one accolade, worth having. Let us hope that we will all some day hear those words:

"Well done, you good and faithful servant! Come on in and share my happiness!"
Amen. Soli Deo Gloria.

During the next hymn please bring the offering to the chancel.

Hymn 159 Lord for the years

Dedication of Offering:

Gracious God,

With our offerings we bring to you what is yours:
our thanks, our praise, our hearts, our lives.

May all that we have and all that we are be used for your purposes, and to your glory.
In Jesus' name. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession:

Loving God,

we give thanks for people whose gifts and talents inspire and bring joy to others;
for those who use their gifts to meet the needs of others.

May they be blessed in their continuing work.

We pray for those who, through unwise investments and decisions, or, because of difficulties in recent times have lost jobs or incomes.

We pray for all in positions of responsibility, whose decisions affect the lives of others:
for our governments in London and in Edinburgh and in Orkney.

Grant them the grace to lead us with wisdom and integrity,
and may we all have the grace to follow their guidance for the sake and safety of others.

We pray for people who take risks in the service of others: medical professionals; police, coastguard; lifeboat, fire and rescue services.

We commend to your care and protection those who preach the gospel where it is dangerous to do so; all who denounce corruption, who speak out for justice even at risk of their livelihoods, or their lives.

Still in this season of Remembrance, we pray for people facing violence in places of war:
Gaza; Ukraine; Yemen;

remembering too those affected by violence in the home;
for all who are afraid, for themselves, or for the safety of others.
We pray for those who are afraid because they have done wrong, and fear the consequences;
for people oppressed by their own sense of failure or inadequacy,
all who suffer from depressive illness.

We bring before you now all those for whom we have special concerns today.
Whatever their need, may they know your presence and your love.

Pause

Gracious God, hear our prayer.

We pray for your Church in Orkney, and throughout the world,
that Christian people will use your gifts generously, lovingly and to your glory.
All our prayers we bring in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Hymn 532 Lord you have come to the seashore

Choir: *Blessed assurance.*

Afterthought:

A reflection by Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

"Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents."
(Matt 25: 20)

And what of the others,
the ones who faithfully took the talents,
but didn't make a killing in the stock market?
The one who forgave seventy times seven,
and it came to nothing.
The one who marched in protests,
and wrote to her MP, but was ignored?
One who loved her enemy, but met only scorn?
The one who prayed and meditated,
but never once kept his mind from wandering?
The one whose praise was never accepted.
The one who sang the song of her soul,
and it wasn't really all that lovely.
The one who told the truth, and looked like a fool.
The one who shared his faith
and nobody, not a soul, cared or believed.
The one who really loved Jesus,
but didn't ever see what she had to offer him.
What of them?

To them the master turns and says gently,
"Well done, good and faithful servant.
I know of one who served perfectly,
and ended in failure, crucified.
You have been trustworthy over a few things.
I will put you in charge of greater things.
For love is always risked, never wasted."
Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes in Unfolding Light

Closing Hymn 497 Almighty Father of all things that be

Closing Words and Benediction

Go and share your master's joy,
at home, at work, at work in the community, wherever you go.
And the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you, and remain with you,
now and always. Amen.

Doxology:

May God's blessing surround you each day, As you trust Him and walk in his way,
May his presence within guard and keep you from sin, Go in peace, go in joy, go in love.

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