



25th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 19 November 2023

READINGS

Zephaniah 1: 1, 12-18; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11; Matthew 25: 14-30.

Being ready

We are approaching the end of the year, and are looking forward to exams, and the promise that such achievement will bring, we are looking forward to the summer holidays where everything closes down and we can relax – some of us on beaches and in various beautiful rural areas, and we are also looking forward to Christmas, with the excitement of Father Christmas, and the hope of meeting up again with family members, some of whom we haven't seen since last year this time. But all these important activities are a while away, and while there are those who decry the appearance of Christmas decorations in October, it does serve to remind us that all these things don't just happen. It needs time to prepare for them. You cannot pass exams on last-minute studying. Other than poor students who don't have much, no one else can hop into the car and head off for the coast with no thought of where to book, what to pack, how to stop things at home, and the rest. And Christmas? You are probably already seeing the holes in your bank account.

Our readings today are all, one way or another, on the subject of "being ready." And there is an urgency about it which is almost threatening. The prophet Zephaniah thunders at the complacency of those who live life to its profligate fullness, and he promises total destruction. None of their wealth or good living will save them. I think Covid taught us something of devastation, but there was enough left after it for most of us to begin again. Many of the refugees from war-torn areas will know what it means to lose everything. And God, in this passage, warns against corruption and careless, thoughtless living and God doesn't negotiate. God will wipe it all out and leave the wealthy as refugees.

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul uses a different metaphor. He says when Jesus comes again, it will be like a thief in the night. He uses the ideas of light and darkness. Those who are unaware of God are living in the dark and sleep is akin to drunkenness. Those who are with God are in the light. Here it's also about awareness. Those who know the ways of God will be aware of God's movements and will not be caught out. Faith, love and the hope of salvation are our protection against the darkness. Although Christ died for ALL so that all may be one in the Kingdom, we need to stick together as those who have accepted that light and encourage one another to keep the new, tiny, Thessalonian body of Christ alive.

Our Gospel parable follows a similar pattern in that the master gives his servants work to do, goes on a journey and will return in the future. The difference here is that a specific task is given to each servant according to their ability. They are to work with the talents (and if you really want to know, a talent is twenty years' worth of daily wages for a labourer,) and return the money to the master plus what they had made when he returns. We know how it ends. The man who had one talent did nothing with it

except preserve it and was severely called to account. Had he been so lacking in entrepreneurial ability, he could have put it into the 1st century equivalent of a bank and got interest for it. He didn't even do that. Instead, his non-action meant it was taken from him and given to the one with the most – to his ten talents was added this one too. This doesn't sit well with us when in our modern world we would surround the servant with love and affirmation and assuage his lack of self-esteem and demand that the master compensate him for the unfair deprivation of his one talent. Maybe this is one of the "awareness" things Jesus wants us to think about. Poverty was and is real, but how poor is "poor", actually? And what God gives, God expects to be used, and God demands accountability.

So, preparations are not only for the big things that come at this time of the year. What are we expected to prepare for, and how aware are we supposed to be as followers of Christ who look to his coming again?

Firstly we need to recognise that Jesus' coming again is not like sitting in an airport waiting for someone on a delayed plane where all you can do, when you have caught up on emails and WhatsApps, is to drink lots of awful coffee and play computer games. This waiting is more like waiting for an expected guest, or a roomful of new furniture, or the delivery of some vital piece of equipment that we need to be able to do our job. We are prepared for what will come, and create a space for it, so it fits when it comes, and we can make the most of the opportunities given us. We are participants in this process, not merely recipients of it. When Jesus comes again, we will recognise him, and we will enable him to do what it says in the Bible, to establish his reign on earth because there are those who follow him and know exactly what is expected of them. But even without the theological esoterism of apocalyptic theology, we remember and to some extent re-create Christ's coming every year. And the season of goodwill is meant to last all year round, where we are aware of the needs of others, and we behave as Christ's body in our communities.

Secondly, we need to be accountable. The master demands to know what we have done with what we were given. In church we are dependent on volunteer assistance, particularly since dedicated giving and church collections are so reduced during the past couple of decades, that we no longer support full time ministry to any great extent. Thank goodness we have the dedicated lay people and self-supporting clergy who do so much of the pastoral and other work needed. But we cannot depend on them. If other demands are put upon them, either family or career wise, their church duties are put aside, and their paid or familial obligations have to take precedence – and that is as it should be. But the reality of this is that church has become something of a voluntary organisation, a hobby which people "who like that sort of thing" spend their Sundays and do the odd thing to make themselves feel good and help the community. Again, I'm not saying for one minute that there isn't incredibly effective ministry taking place and thank God for it. It is carried out by people who really do get the message that Christ will come again, and as his body in this world, we do his work to the best of our ability.

But no one has any right to demand accountability. What happens to parents of baptized children after the baptism? Or newly married couples? Some take it seriously, but most expect weddings, baptisms, funerals and special blessing services because "this is our church." Their church, which other people pay for and support and make available to them. In the old days, in the stricter protestant churches, anyway, you could not take communion unless you had paid your monthly or quarterly donation. We are critical of "stoep funerals", and I'm not saying they are a good thing, but are we not making God very cheap by having no accountability at all? We all know the loving, forgiving Jesus, but without the God of wrath, that forgiveness is a platitude, a sentiment, and in the modern world is regarded as the go-to place for old ladies and the few odd people who like that sort of thing. Thank goodness we have young people who love and value and serve God. The clash will come when the traditional church will have to give way considerably to the new ideas and the different needs of this generation.

But even if the church of the future has no designated buildings, and the body of Christ is an online sign-up, or small groups in houses, or meeting under trees which some of our South African churches already do, or we create organisations like the Red Cross or St John's Ambulance or Gift of the Givers and Doctors without Borders, we still have a responsibility. We have to hand on the knowledge that Jesus Christ came to earth to defeat sin, evil and death. We have to hand on a healthy body of Christ which is sound in its teaching, it knows what it stands for, is active in the community, and is proud to be associated with a crucified Lord. Yes, Jesus is coming, and Yes, we need to be prepared. Let's put our shoulder to the wheel, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, make a strong, determined church whose Gospel is truly Good News, and the next generation will have a church well prepared for, even if its clothing will be unrecognizable to those of us who works so hard for it. God has given us the gift of God's Son, and the empowering of the Holy Spirit. What will we have to show for it when Jesus returns?

Amen