

The Second Sunday before Advent

Collect: Heavenly Lord, within your wisdom is the world's salvation: stir us from apathy, restrain us from excess and revive in us new hope that all creation will be healed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

1 Thessalonians 5.1-2, 5-11: Now concerning the times and the seasons brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.

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. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 25.14-30: '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."

Reflection: Last Sunday and on Wednesday we had a particular opportunity to pause for 2 minutes, and to remember and honour those who have died in the service of their country. It is important that we do this and important also that we take time to remember others who we have loved, who helped to shape the people we are and for who we grieve. These last months have been difficult for so many people and for most of those who have had a loss, it has meant their grieving has begun with restrictions on the visiting of a loved one and on attendance at a funeral. We all can play a part in helping friends and neighbours who are grieving by listening and being attentive to their sorrow, helping in practical ways and enabling a person to begin to live with their loss.

The need for people to weep of course is acknowledged as something that is both natural and necessary. The shortest verse in the Bible is “Jesus wept” and is an expression of Jesus’ grieving at the death of his friend Lazarus. So when at the end of the parable that we have listened to today, Jesus refers to weeping and gnashing of teeth, it seems inconsistent with the compassionate way in which Jesus would reach out to and help those in need. As for “gnashing of teeth” well it is now quite a common thing for people to wear a mouth guard when sleeping to protect them from the grinding of teeth, so we can say both weeping and gnashing of teeth are human characteristics. But when Matthew writes about them, and about a person being thrown into outer darkness, it makes me feel very uncomfortable and question whether Jesus might really have said such a thing and if he did, why.

It is the case that using exaggeration was a method of teaching used by rabbis so those listening to Jesus would have been alert to this. However, on this occasion I think we need to consider more carefully the circumstances in which Jesus was teaching, who the parable was addressed to and how it relates to his impending trial and crucifixion.

The one driven into the darkness of a desert and bearing sins was the scapegoat. This was a part of the violent sacrificial system that Jesus’ death turned upside down. The Temple ritual of atonement saw one goat killed and one driven out into darkness. This ritual enabled the cleansing of the people from their sin and was conducted by priests, especially the High Priest, who through a separate ritual were themselves deemed sufficiently pure to perform such a sacrifice. On the day of atonement, the focus on the goat that was sacrificed would be central but the one thrown out into darkness, while symbolically significant, was largely unconsidered.

Jesus, who will be killed outside the city wall, clearly identifies himself with the one thrown out and discarded and, within the parable read this morning, we recognise that in a quite uncomfortable way we are being asked to enter into the mindset of those who would have him killed.

There are two other times when the phrase *outer darkness* is used in Matthew’s gospel. When Jesus confronts the scribes and pharisees about their attitudes to the ordinary people celebrating at a feast and comparing them to one who turns up at a feast but not dressed or ready to join in with what is being celebrated. And when he praises the hopeful faith shown by a Roman centurion which is not found in the religious leaders. On these occasions, and in the parable today, Jesus was asking his listeners to really be attentive and to listen and to think about their faith.

Jesus still asking of the religious leaders who had a particular apocalyptic way of thinking, to think again. He is saying to them that those who find themselves in a dark place, for whatever reason and this will include himself, can often understand and identify with the story of the scapegoat. Jesus does not share the apocalyptic fear of these religious leaders but instead, from the place of one about to be driven out, he speaks of the end of things in a different way, from the perspective of the forgiving suffering servant who brings human transformation.

He asks those so sure they have got it right and who are not open to self-examination to be careful because from their pride and from a sense of vengeance, they might be about to fall. And in the parable, we find the reason why it is that particularly the religious leaders at that time got things so wrong and had so distanced themselves from the everyday experience of the people.

It is because, like the servant in the parable who buried his talent, they themselves lived with a picture, an image, of God as wrathful. And they inflicted this picture on others. What is crucial in the parable is how the relationship with the master caused each of these servants to act when the stakes were high. In other words, most crucial is their faith in their master. This is most explicit for the third servant who says he acted as he did out of fear. His relationship with his master was one of fear. He says, “He knew his master to be a harsh man”. The other two servants imagine their master as free, generous, audacious and they by contrast have a faith that creatively reflects this.