

**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 15 November 2020**

**Readings: I Thessalonians 5.1-11; Matthew 25.14-30**

Listening to Daphne, Ben and Deborah it's clear they value the talents of which they spoke. And, of course, none of them – none of us – has only one of the talents. Daphne's talent of the hands is passed on in cards that show she cares. Deborah's talent of the heart is expressed as she uses her mind for such thoughtful words of comfort. Ben's talent of the mind is offered to his students with a commitment that springs from the heart.

As we reflect upon the parable of the talents it's interesting to note how valuable a talent was. Some suggest one talent was equivalent to ten thousand days' wages, or the payroll of fifty workers for two hundred days. So, considering the recent increase in the Living Wage, to £9.50 an hour, that means a single talent in today's money is £665,000. Now, let's not be literalists. Who knows exactly what is denoted here by 'a talent', because the experts on such things differ? Suffice it to say, though, that it's symbolic of something supremely precious – as invaluable as skilful hands, an agile mind or a compassionate heart.

It has been suggested that we should understand the parable not as a recommendation that we work harder or make as much as we can. Nor that it is urging us to understand what we have as something we have earned or come to deserve. All our talents – be they our money, our dexterity, our intellect, our philanthropy or anything else – all of them are gifts we have received. Might the parable be helping us to recognise that the Christian way to understand such gifts is first and foremost to appreciate them for the precious things they are? And we don't appreciate them as precious by hiding them away, but by putting them to optimum use, so that the potential with which they have been invested might be brought to fulfilment. Nor are they to be denied, with that false modesty which tries to pretend we don't have the talents that we so obviously *do* have. We do not express much gratitude to the One who made us creative, clever or kind by claiming we are aren't! The parable presses us gratefully to accept what we have been given, and to give that gratitude the truth by making the most of the talent.

When Luke narrates Jesus telling a similar parable (19.12ff), a nobleman gives ten of his staff ten pounds each – about 10% of the value of Matthew's talents. As Matthew has it, Jesus speaks of three workers receiving significantly different amounts from each other: one five talents, one two, and the last a single talent. I like Matthew's account. After all, we, too, do not all receive the same amount of talents – be they cash or capabilities. So what I hear here is not that we are all called to do great things – like the one who had five talents and doubled their assets - but rather that our task is to do diligently and determinedly the things, great or small, whatever we've been given to do. It's about not burying – denying – what we have, but making the most of it.

It has been suggested that the greatest gift we have received is the call to be disciples. I can identify with that. I marvel considerably that God loves me, but I marvel far, far

more that God calls me to follow God's way and to be a useful instrument of God's purposes. Moi? How come I've been blessed with such a pearl beyond price? Just as it is with our other talents, so it is with our Christian life. We are not all made for high profile Christian lives, though some are and ought not to refute it. Many of us have rather more discreet Christian vocations, but discreet should not be understood as hidden, less still buried. The essential Christian vocation is to love God and one another, by things like not responding to injustice with the violence of silence, not wriggling out of one lie with another, not walking by on the other side when we encounter a person in need.

The life of Christian discipleship is about accepting the love God has poured into our hearts and letting it flow out again, abundantly. As we live through the current pandemic, we might ponder what talents this situation requires us not to cast into a hole. Someone blessed with the five talents of a scientist might work on a vaccine – well done, good and faithful servant, as you hold out to the global community some green shoots of hope. But five talents are a lot: fifty workers' wages for a thousand days. How about if you have the two talents of managing a grocery superstore? Well done, good and faithful servant, as you and your colleagues feed the nation through one lockdown after another. And if you have a single talent – say time, or kindness – that, too, is not for interring but for expressing. How would it be if all the time and kindness in the world were so carefully hidden that we lost its capacity to disperse the shadows of this season?

The parable uses hyperbole – weeping, wailing, darkness and gnashing of teeth -to describe God's disappointment when we misunderstand our talents, just as much as when we misuse them. But just as there is joy in heaven when a sinner repents, so there is heart- warming affirmation when we appreciate what we have been given, exploit its potential and put it at the disposal of the community. Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” Ultimately, this life is not about gaining ever more to secrete or fritter, but accepting God's constantly regenerated gifts consistently to use them as an instrument of God's blessing for the world.

Amen, and thanks be to God.