

ZOOM Service 15th November 2020

“Are we ready?”

Bible reading – Matthew 25v14-30

Being ready for what is going to happen, prepared for the unexpected is part and parcel of being human.

Women who are pregnant often make up a bag, weeks in advance of their due date, with things they and the new baby will need when the time comes.

Top sports teams gear up for a new season perhaps knowing their best team to put out week by week, but with a squad and backroom set-up designed to give them the best possibility of success in the campaign to come.

2 weeks from now is Advent Sunday. This marks the start of a new Christian year or season. Meanwhile today, we are almost 2000 years nearer the time Jesus was speaking about in Matthew 25! Are we ready for a new season and the great finale?

First a bit of background.

Matthew 24 and 25 are among the hotly contested passages when it comes to understanding what Jesus was saying. Jesus is now just with his disciples. They initiate a conversation seeking clarification about a prophecy he has given.

Much in Matthew 24 is Jesus anticipating events fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70, probably; then, at 24v36 he turns his disciples' attention the end of all time – making it clear this will be at a time and date he is ignorant of.

A thrust of what he says is BE READY for when that time comes, and ... are you living today ready and expectant?

10 days ago, someone phoned me to set in place plans for her funeral. She has recently had a terminal prognosis and wants things in place for those she will leave behind. With great courage and realism, she is ready.

We are used to asking, “How are we doing?” In schools this may focus on examination outcomes or the dreaded OFSTED visit. In commerce it comes typically when interim or annual results are published, and the size of dividends are announced.

Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God.

Throughout his ministry and teaching Jesus made it clear we can find God's kingdom or rule now; but, also there will be a day when God's reign will be seen fully. It is this 'Not-yet' aspect he is talking about in our reading ... Are we ready ... embracing God's rule in such a way now so we know we won't be embarrassed when the time of reckoning up comes?

Many of us are familiar with the first few verses of John 14 ... "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms ..."

As in Matthew 25, Jesus was addressing his disciples, the ones who had not evaporated along the way, not Judas who had left to betray him but including Peter still to deny him but later ready to confess his readiness to follow irrespective of the cost.

Fully engaged now and ready for a day we can't predict with certainty: what does this mean as followers of Jesus today?

A talent in 1st century Israel was a sum of money; the business owner was in effect parcelling up parts of his company among staff to see what returns they would bring in. It's an analogy to illuminate a wider application.

As followers of Jesus, God's children by adoption, through faith in Jesus:

a) **We are to live now as God's trusted servants.**

This is how Jesus saw himself. He was the Son of God fully human as Jesus of Nazareth, but about his heavenly Father's business; his bread and butter, meat and drink, found in discovering and fulfilling God's will on earth.

When we are made children of God – born again with a new identity - we join the family firm.

Annie and I have a friend who pursued his professional life with a memorable motto: "I always dressed for the job I wanted next rather than merely good enough for the job I had already."

It's time to dressed in the company uniform, fulfilling our distinctive roles on earth; making sure our lives match up to the clear and plain teaching of the Bible.

b) **We have been given with a distinctive investment of grace.**

This is what the Bible means by spiritual gifts.

What you have is different to me; what makes us distinctive is these marks of grace are unlike anything non-Christians can have.

In 1 Corinthians 12v7 we are told

"To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

All our spiritual gifts need to be used and deployed if the whole body of Christ is to be effective.

As Paul again puts it in Romans 12v4-5:

“For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”

That some have more, and others less is not an indication of worth, value or significance; the distribution is for God to determine and we are all equal in that we are accountable for what we do with what has been entrusted to us.

I recall a conversation with a man wrestling with the different needs of his children. His dilemma: could he share more of his resources with one than the other – what did I think. My response was what he had was his to use as he saw best; if one child had a greater need then that was a perfectly appropriate, in my view.

Equality before God is about shared identity; salvation is not even distribution of the earthly spoils, so to speak.

Let me add an important footnote.

Matthew 25 is not about money primarily; at the same time money matters and, of course, the love of money is a root of all evil. It is important that from time-to-time we talk about money as Christians, and reasonable the buck should stop with me.

I thank publicly the expressions of thoughtfulness and generosity we have seen in financial matters through 2020. BUT:

Beware the pitfall of compartmentalising our thinking when it comes to the life of faith.

To highlight spiritual gifts that come with being born again may suggest if we are faithful with that or the church-part of our lives the rest belongs to me to do with as I please. No! We are God’s children and servants not shareholders.

In 1st century middle-Eastern life, a servant was wholly owned by the master of the business.

That feels very alien to our 21st century western world-view. However, Jesus was happy to use the same word in Mark 10 about how we relate to one another.

Remember God does not forcibly conscript anybody; we sign on voluntarily because in Jesus he sacrificed everything to secure our rescue and to free us from eternal judgement. As servants of God we agree to being wholly owned and in the service of God. This is how things were meant to be; to be God’s servant is to be free indeed. It has an all-encompassing impact.

In the words of Psalm 24v1 ...

“The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.”

We steward things rather than own them.

As David declares in 1 Chronicles 29v14 (and familiar to us in our communion liturgy):
“... all things come from you, and of your own have we given you ...”

Are we ready for Jesus to return and receive our account for how we are living? If that is our pledge and intention: ... we live here and now:

- as trusted servants dressed for where we are headed in character and behaviour
- fully deploying heaven’s grace gifts on earth trusted representative and servants
- with an integrity about who we are, that recognises wealth, stuff - including money, savings and what we have set aside for the rainy days is really on loan and available as God directs.

Here is an example of what can occur when we take seriously what God is saying to us.

In the past few weeks Annie and I have tuned in on-line to a 4-week sermon series from another group of churches in a similar socio-economic milieu to our own but maybe twice as many regular churchgoers in normal times; about FINANCES – God’s view and our response as Christians.

The final talk, given on 25th October, invited regular church members to make their response to what they heard God saying to them. Earlier this week I got in touch with the Vicar to ask how this had gone down. He replied that just 2 weeks on he has heard:

- a) an older couple are offering to give a large sum of money for a young couple (not in their family!) to enable them to put down a deposit on a house,
- b) church members have come together spontaneously to set up a food bank to support people in their villages in need, and
- c) when the pledges from just one third of the church family who have acted so far are added up the church income is already guaranteed to be £52,000 more than that promised for 2020!

Thanks be to God for his trust in us and the opportunity to play our part here and now.

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Team Rector