

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."

Let me begin by telling the story of Paul and Pip. I got to know Paul after taking his wife Sue's funeral, and her tragic death hit Paul hard. Paul decided to get a dog, to give him a reason to get out of the house each day, to enjoy the countryside he had enjoyed with Sue, and to have some company in the house while the pain of grief was still raw. So Paul went to the rescue centre, and came home with Pip, a sheepdog.

Pip had had a bad life. No one quite knew his story, but the poor dog would pace in circles for hours, never more than two metres away from Paul. Paul came to realise that Pip had been chained up for years, and had learned to do everything within the limits of his chain. Even once he was free, Pip still behaved as if the chain was on his collar.

How many of us do the same? We keep up the same old routine, the same habits and patterns, regardless of what the world is doing around us. Up to a point, that well-worn path is a comfort, we know what route we will take to work, we know what we will have for tea tomorrow, and we know where we will go on holiday, because we've done the same many times before. Sound familiar to anyone?

I wonder if the third slave in our Gospel story was a bit like Pip. So used to his old habits that when he was given a gift, he carried on going what he'd always known. For the third slave receives the gift of a new life - 15 years' worth of wages, and simply goes and buries it in the ground, and does nothing different to what he's always done.

The slave neglects what he's been given, and rejects the generosity of his master. Not only that, but when the master departs and gives the slave some space and a new life - the slave instead derides his master for such a hands-off approach.

So what does that say to us about God? Jesus tells this story in the days before his betrayal, arrest and crucifixion. His disciples struggled to understand what he was talking about, and yet with the benefit of hindsight we know that Jesus was about to give up his life, to give us the gift of eternal life through his death and resurrection. There is reassurance here, that God can demonstrate love, not by being extremely attentive, but by giving us the space to 'do' for ourselves and learn without being smothered or constrained.

Faced with this freedom, this unfettered love and encouragement, we come to the readings from Zephaniah and the letter to the Thessalonians. Now, I'm not one for preaching hellfire and

damnation, but there is something about this time of year when our set lectionary readings turn us to the topic of judgement day. I can see you squirming in your seats already...

Zephaniah was especially vehement about the idea of judgement. His language, the metaphors and images he uses, are powerful shock tactics - for his initial audience were the people who were living happily under King Josiah, a good man who had rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem.

Yet Zephaniah is warning them of the coming judgement day, he prophesies the coming Babylonian invasion when many would be taken into captivity - and Zephaniah saw this as a punishment for the people who had been lacklustre in their faith, who had not put heart and soul into living and worshipping as God had commanded.

Verse twelve shows what Zephaniah is railing against - those who are complacent, and assume that God will not be active or attentive. We might say that this is a judgement against those who become slothful - being habitually lazy, or disinclined to exertion. Those who do everything within the limits of the chain because it makes for an easy life.

So we come to Paul, writing his first letter to the church in Thessaloniki. Paul tells them, you are Children of light. He means that Christians are, by their faith in God, are already equipped to face what lies ahead.

Because we live in the clear light of day, Paul writes - whilst we may not know the day or hour when our thoughts and deeds are judged before God, we can have confidence that having faith and love for God will be our motivation to turn away from sloth, and live as citizens of God's kingdom, here and now.

To return to the analogy of Pip and Paul - we can stop being held by the imagined chain, and have confidence to be fully alive in Christ, to accept the new life He has given us and not be constrained by the old habits of sin and slothfulness which once constrained us.

This choice might be quite a stark one for us. Not the burning hellfires, for our faith gives us confidence that our sins are forgiven and we are redeemed by Christ's victory on the cross. But a choice to accept the gift of Christ's life, to be set free from the chains and habits which have constrained us, and live out our calling as beloved children of God, ready to face what lies ahead with confidence and vigour.

This stage of lockdown might seem like the clouds of apathy, and, to use the monastic term, *acedia*, (a sort of cross between boredom and laziness) have kicked in. It might feel like there's a chain keeping us in a tight circle of same old-same-old. That's ok - but it doesn't have to be the last word.

As you come to receive Christ into your hands this morning, ask Christ to fill them afresh with his risen life, and help you walk freely as a beloved child of God, to break the chains of bad habits and slothfulness, and watch for the Christ who seeks to bless us with life in abundance, this and every day. Amen.