

## MISSION SUNDAY

Nicky Ing – 13th November 2005

**Zephaniah 1: 14-18; Psalm 76; 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11; Matthew 25: 14-30**

Both the Old and the New Testament readings today deal with various understandings of 'the last day' or what some people will call the end times, things which we cannot really comprehend. The prophet Zephaniah, who prophesied about 600 years before the coming of Christ, warns those who think that God is indifferent to them...those who confuse the worship of God with the practice of idolatry and pagan worship...he warns that the day of the Lord will be for them '*a time full of darkness, not of light...a day of wrath, distress and anguish....a day of ruin and devastation, of darkness and gloom....*' There is no promise here, only a fearful warning to those who move away from the loving care of God...that a time of retribution is '*near, near, and hastening fast.*' Then Paul, in the letter to the Thessalonian Christians, also believes that the day of the Lord is near...but for him this is something wonderful to look forward to, for himself and for those to whom he was writing. He reminds us that God has destined us not for his anger, but for receiving salvation through Jesus Christ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him (in this context, awake means alive, and asleep means dead.) The Thessalonian Church was struggling with persecution, and despair, as they were longing for Jesus to return. Paul believed that the glorified Jesus would return very soon, that it would happen during his own lifetime. Some of the people in the church in Thessalonica were discouraged because people were dying there before the promised return of Jesus...so Paul is trying in his letter to encourage them to remember that they are 'children of light', and need not fear death. It is as if Time doesn't really matter...whether we are dead or alive, we are in God's hands, he assures them...(and us too). Paul understands the doubts and fears the Christian community is experiencing, and reminds them, as nobody knows when the end of time will be, that it may come '*like a thief in the night*'....that what we need is to be *prepared*....by living with awareness of God's love, and in trust. It is this theme of *being prepared* that we can hold onto from the rather difficult parable Jesus tells of the talents.

The actual talent, if we were to measure its weight in gold, would apparently equal what a labourer would earn over a period of 6,000 days work (15 years) in the first century, a huge amount for anyone in those days. Because of its value, this same word talent has come into our language to demonstrate a natural gift of ability and aptitude. Some people are simply born more talented than others, and it is a gift, not an achievement. What we do with it is important.

The man in Jesus' story is an enterprising employer, who hopes that his own flair and drive in business matters will be reflected in his servants' attitude to his challenge. He doesn't tell them what to do with the talents, but *trusts* them to use their own initiative and imagination. The third servant, the one who refuses to involve himself in the spirit of the enterprise, thinks that the safest way to handle his talent is to bury it and return it

intact to his master....and, knowing that his master expected more, he then tries to justify his action by expressing his fear of the master..(but it seems as if he didn't fear the consequences of disobeying him!)....so he was afraid to take the risk of working with the money and failing to succeed in making more. It seems that Jesus is telling us that there can be no religion without risk, or adventure, or a spirit of enterprise....courage, really....we need to use the gifts and opportunities we have....because the third servant was fearful, and opted for security first, he lost everything. His defence is interesting too...he focuses on the harshness and meanness of the master, not his own lack of enterprise...instead of rejoicing in his talent, his negative attitude makes him unwilling to use it, and he risks nothing....so of course, nothing comes of it.

The parable speaks to us too about God: a God who bestows gifts on all of us....and so we *are* gifted. God gives us talents, and so we *are* talented....What matters is not what our talents are, but how we use them in the service of God's kingdom. God takes chances with us, entrusting us with particular gifts....and has no guarantee of a return. But God's generosity is such that if we take what we are given and allow God to work through us, we find, to our amazement, that the results can be remarkable, and, if we are really honest, that the results don't really have anything to do with us....it is God who achieves wonderful things through us. (Often through hardship..eg Hilton Festival, craft markets etc.) It's not so much our achievements that matter, as our openness to God. The parable is also a message to the Church, to be outward looking and *missionary*....to be positive in sharing the Good News of the Gospel, so that it will spread to more and more people. (Today is Mission Sunday).

So, what do *we* do with these Gifts we have? Do we take risks and use them for the good of others.... put them to work so that they can multiply and double in value? Or do we hide them, like the 3rd man in the parable, failing to recognize them for what they are, and feel envious of the gifts we see in others? How do we use our gift of *time*? Do we see time as a talent which we need to invest wisely, so that life can be more fulfilling not only for us but also for others? If we just waste it, we may feel disillusioned and sad later on, and wish we had used it better. And what do we do with our *wealth*....material resources? Can we offer that particular treasure for the good of others, no matter how little it may be...even a small amount which we can put into the basket on the first Sunday of each month can mean a big difference to a hungry child, especially if we can go *without* something we enjoy buying....What about gifts or talents we may have for teaching, for ministering, for encouraging....for bringing joy to others....the list is endless! When were you blessed by a gift which someone else used for you.....a teacher or a doctor or nurse, someone who prepared a beautiful meal, or a wonderful piece of music, or art work.....or someone who affirmed you and helped you to believe in yourself.....can you recognize these things as gifts from God? I wonder what God is wanting to say to you and me today.....about our particular gift, or talent....and the risk we need to take in using it, growing it to its fullest. We will need energy, and watchfulness, and perseverance if we are to develop the gifts of God. In the words of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, which we read earlier, and for our community at Church of the Ascension in our own time: Ch 5:11: '*Therefore encourage one another, and build up each other, as indeed you are doing*'. And may we learn to trust in God's

grace and lean on his strength, and give thanks today for all the wonderful gifts he has poured out for each one of us. **Amen.**