



**A Sermon by the Succentor, The Reverend Philippa White on
19 November 2017**

**Enter into the joy of your Master!
(Zephaniah 1: 7, 12-18, 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11, Matthew 25:
14-30)**

This parable is pretty near the bottom of my wish list of passages to preach on. I don't like it. I don't like the idea of judgment; the unfairness of the set up; the perfectly reasonable behaviour that gets the poor third bloke cast out. And that's leaving aside the notion of slavery that underpins the whole parable.

But that's the way the church's cycle of readings works – it confronts us with the uncomfortable parts of the Bible. And the point of the sermon is to make us face up to them. Sometimes we can run away and preach on the other readings instead – but to be honest, they're not much better today. No: the lectionary is forcing us to take a proper hard look at this parable.

And when we do, I want us to remember that parables are not the same as allegories. An allegory is a story in which every single aspect stands for something else – something theological. If you've read the Pilgrim's Progress, that's an allegory – Christian, the hero, stands for every Christian; the people he meets stand for virtues and vices (and again, their name makes that pretty obvious) and his journey across a weird landscape to the Celestial City stands for our Christian journey through life to heaven.

But a parable isn't like that. We can't read this parable and say "aha, the master stands for God, and the talents stand for the, well, talents God gives us, and the first two slaves stand for Christians, and the last slave stands for people who don't do what God wants." That's not what Jesus does in parables.

A parable is a story that turns reality and expectations upside down and guides us to emerge the other side with a new understanding of something. Something about God, or something about us, or something about our assumptions.

So let's look in this story for the expectations that are turned upside down and the new understanding that emerges.

To do that, we need a bit of context. In the society Jesus is in, with no organised banking system, either you kept your money on you; you put it somewhere safe; or you asked someone to look after it for you. In any of those cases, you were vulnerable to thieves; but if you asked someone to look after it and it got nicked, it was their fault, not yours.

If you were someone of low social status – like the slaves in this parable – and someone higher up than you asked you to look after some money for them, there was no way to say no. So in this story, the slaves given these enormous sums of money (about £10k) were being pushed into a very vulnerable position. If it got stolen, what would they do? There was only one way to protect yourselves from thieves. If you buried money that had been left with you for safekeeping, the law said you'd done enough. If it was stolen, it wasn't your fault and you didn't have to pay it back.

So the third slave was doing something sensible. Unlike the first two, who were running incredible risks – what if they'd lost the lot? – he was removing his legal liability. And this is what the parable turns upside down. It seems to make sense that we should be sensible, cautious, play it safe, prioritise security. But in this parable Jesus says no – take risks! Because what matters is not what you have or how well you do – what matters is committing to the task you take on. The first two slaves are placed in the same unfair situation – but they think laterally. They make the best of it. Meanwhile the third slave thought he was doing right – but he was acting out of fear. He was afraid of the master, and of risks not paying off. In Paul's terminology, he was a person living in the dark. To be living in the light, you need to be motivated by the opposite of fear: by faith, hope and love, what Paul calls the armour of God.

So the parable is a story that warns us against being motivated by fear and the way that this can make us paralysed, reluctant to do what God calls us to. And with that as a starting point, maybe we can find something more useful in the other two readings. Both of them have the same sense of urgency that we find in the parable: the idea that God is coming and that we will be called to account.

That's the theme we've been having throughout this Kingdom season: God is coming! It's the last judgment theme which was once so strong in Advent, now moved to the end of the church year – God is coming. God will make all things new. The light of eternity will illuminate our world. And the world as we know it will come to an end.

Is this good news or bad news?

It's bad news for people still playing by the old rules – of caution, of hoarding what they've got, of acting out of fear. But it can be good news for those of us who realise we need to live as people who know God is coming. People who put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. People who put that faith, and love, and hope into action and accept the responsibilities which come with being a disciple: the responsibilities of living with an awareness of God and resisting the temptation to think God will never turn up. And because of this, responding to God's call to share the good things of the world, to take notice of those who are less important, to listen to the voices of the voiceless, pay attention to the powerless, refuse to hoard wealth for the sake of security and instead to share everything in faith. That's the way we're called to refuse to act out of fear, and instead to act out of confidence.

Zephaniah tells us about the bad news. The Jerusalem elite think they have God in a box, enclosed by ritual. They think God's incapable of acting. They carry on exploiting the poor, indulging their greed, ignoring the needs of their fellow humans. But God comes. God's holiness and the light of God's eternity burn in the streets of Jerusalem. God's holiness destroys those who refuse to be holy – who act out of fear and a desire for security – those who refuse to accept the responsibilities of God's people.

And Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, tells us about the good news. His friends in Thessalonica had taken up the responsibilities of God's people. They needed to persevere, to live in faith and hope and love – but he had every confidence in them. Living in the light of eternity was their right, as God's people, but also a major responsibility.

It's our right too – it's what we're called to do – but that also makes it our responsibility. We need to live in holiness, in the light of eternity; not just to avoid the bad news, but to be the good news. We, like the Thessalonians, need to dress ourselves in firm faith, active love and real hope: hope that isn't just for our future after the end of the world, but for a better future for everyone within the world. We need to refuse the temptation to fear and despair, and instead act with courage and commitment, responding to God's call to defend the vulnerable, honour human life, and oppose evil. And then we will enter into the joy of our Master.