

SERMON FOR ST JOHN'S, BUCKLANDS BEACH
4th October, 2015

THEME: Abundant Possibilities

READINGS: Psalm 16

2 Peter 1:1-11 (The Message)

Matthew 25:14-29 (NRSV)

As we know the nature of parables is that they have layers and layers of meaning. They are like onions - peel away one layer and you find another, then another. That was the genius of Jesus' story-telling and this parable is no exception. So let's explore this one and hear what the Spirit might be saying to us today.

Rather than look at the success or otherwise of the servants, which is often the layer that is explored, today I'd like to explore another layer and that is the attitude of the servants toward their master.

In this parable we have one master and three slaves. The master sees capabilities within each of his slaves. He has obviously studied them and noted their individual abilities. Yet he also acknowledges that they have different capacities so, when he is going away, he gives to each one the amount of responsibility he feels they are capable of handling. That speaks of a caring, considerate employer who was clearly not setting anyone up for failure. And the amounts he entrusted to them, even the smallest amount, were very, very generous.

Apparently historians of language believe that the modern understanding of a talent as a gift or ability was derived directly from this parable but in the time of Jesus the word 'talent' meant a specific amount of money – a very large amount of money, in fact. A talent was a unit of money approximating fifteen years of earnings by a day labourer. So the amounts of money mentioned in this parable are enormous. Five talents was equivalent to 75 years earnings!

But not only was the master caring, considerate and generous he was also trusting. He left them for a "long time", giving no instructions about how to use the money, no KPI's (Key Performance Indicators) to fill in, no line management structure to keep them on target. He simply gave them

the amount he felt they could handle and then the space to use their imaginations, their initiative, their wisdom, to do something with it.

All three slaves had the same master - caring, considerate, generous and trusting. For two of the slaves, their understanding of the nature of the master gave them the freedom to be courageous and to take some risks with the result that they doubled the value of the original gift. And the master was delighted.

But the third slave was different. He saw the master in an entirely different light which caused him to live in a state of anxious, cautious, confinement, ruled by the fear of getting it wrong. His perception of the master's nature meant that he was not free within himself to embrace new possibilities. He saw his task as keeping everything exactly as it was, preserving the status quo, not daring to adventure into unknown territory. And the master was not best pleased.

Was there a link between the slave's view of the master and the final outcome? I think that's indisputable. Jesus told this parable to emphasise that how we view God effects the way we behave.

There's a great illustration of that in a book called "Good Goats". Dennis Linn, one of the authors, tells his own story.

"For many years I have prayed for healing of life's crippling hurts. But I finally came up against a problem in my life where healing prayer didn't work. Why not? I am half German. Although I don't want to stereotype all Germans, like many of my ancestors I was born a self-righteous German. I saw all the mistakes and errors in everyone but myself. For years I tried every kind of healing prayer in order to be rid of my self-righteousness. Although these prayers healed me of many things, my self-righteousness did not change. I often wondered why, when I prayed so hard, God did not heal me.

"Then one day, I noticed that my self-righteousness had nearly disappeared. Why, I asked, after so many years of struggle, was there suddenly and almost automatically such a wonderful change in my life?

"I changed when my image of God changed. I discovered that we become like the God we adore. Unfortunately, the God I grew up adoring

was a self-righteous God who sat on his judgement throne and took particular note of all the mistakes and errors in everyone. While that God was at the centre of my life, no matter how hard I prayed, I could not change. I became like the God I adored.”

It was through a pastoral encounter that Dennis Linn’s image of God was changed. Hilda came to him about her son who was into prostitution, drugs and violence. He had attempted suicide many times and she was worried that if he did die he would be punished by God. Dennis, secretly agreeing with her, got her to imagine that she was sitting in the judgement seat next to God when her son appeared before it. He then asked her what her son was feeling. She responded, “He feels so lonely and empty.” He asked what she would like to do and she said, “I want to throw my arms around my son,” and she began to cry. He then asked her to look into God’s eyes and watch what God wanted to do. God stepped down from the throne, and just as Hilda had done, embraced her son. And the three of them, Hilda, her son and God, cried together and held one another.

Dennis Linn says, “I was stunned. What Hilda taught me in those few minutes is the bottom line of healthy spirituality: God loves us at least as much as the person who loves us the most. My image of God, my understanding of God’s nature was changed in that encounter. I learned that in every aspect of our lives, we become like the God we adore.”

Back to our parable. The image of the master that was held by the first two slaves in this parable was vastly different from that of the third. Yet they all had the same master. Two saw only the positive attributes that were clearly evident in his character and this freed them to be alive, vibrant, enthusiastic, innovative and creative. They were not afraid to take risks; they did not fear negative outcomes; they lived with the inner freedom that comes from knowing that love is at the core of life and love conquers all else. Life was to be embraced, not to be feared.

But the third slave, for some reason unknown to us, chose to see the master in a totally different light. He chose to dwell upon his possible harshness and unfairness, real or imagined, and this perception of the master led to a life governed by anxiety. Instead of thinking, “Wow, fancy the master thinking I’m capable of handling this. How can I use it for the best?”, this slave was consumed by the question, “What if I get it wrong?”

His fear constrained his choices and his actions. Life was to be guarded and protected against contamination.

The master's reactions are worth studying. To the two who had lived in the confidence of a trusting relationship he expressed his delight. They were entrusted with more and, most importantly, they were invited to share in the master's joy – "enter into the joy of your master." The relationship was transformed into one of mutuality rather than that of master and slave.

But his reaction was very different toward the slave who had played it safe, who had misinterpreted the master's nature, lived defensively and expected judgement. Surprisingly the master did nothing to disabuse him of his misjudgement but left him to live with the consequences of it – without joy, with a diminished life not an expanded one and, saddest of all, unaware of the joy that could have been his.

So what might the Spirit be saying to the church?

There are two ways of seeing Church. Churches can be seen as fortresses keeping those within safe from the world, defending God and keeping evil forces at bay. Or they can be seen as wells from which we are invited to drink, and welcome others to come and drink too, so that life is sustained and nourished. Then we are entrusted to step out boldly and confidently, setting free the immeasurable gift God's love for humankind.

One of the loveliest definitions of faith comes from the Latin word ***Fiducia***, which is best translated as "radical trust". Kierkegaard, one of the theological giants of the nineteenth century, used this metaphor to describe faith:

Faith is like floating in seventy thousand fathoms of water. If you struggle, if you tense up and thrash about, you will eventually sink. But if you relax and trust, you will float.

Faith is trusting in the buoyancy of God.

What kind of church we build will depend on the image of God we choose to have at the centre. As Dennis Linn found out, we become like the God we adore. We can choose the way of the first two slaves and trust in the

buoyancy of God, freeing us to explore the abundant possibilities God holds out for us, freeing us from caution, allowing us to take some risks.

Or we can choose the way of the third slave, living with an anxious defensiveness, governed by the fear of getting it wrong, protecting the status quo, avoiding risk at all costs.

We are left with the question: What kind of Church do we want? And what do we need to either let go or embrace, corporately and individually, to allow that to emerge?