

Pentecost 28
13/11/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Judges 4:1-7

Psalm 123

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

Faithfulness in a Time of Waiting

Sermon preached by Rev. (Deacon) Gavin Blakemore

Let me say from the outset that contrary to some parts of the broader church, including the televangelists, that today's Gospel parable does NOT justify a prosperity gospel. Instead it challenges believers to emulate that modeled by Jesus in faithful service using their God given abilities for the sake of the Kingdom. Let me also set your minds at ease as I will not be using this parable to challenge you all to evaluate and lift your giving as we come to the congregational meeting today and making decisions on the 2012 budget. Instead I wish to focus on this parable as a call to faithfulness in a time of waiting, but let's come back to that in a moment.

The headlines over this last week have included two significant global issues which speak to the state of humankind and the world. The most recent is the ongoing fallout of the Global Financial Crisis and the massive government debt of various European countries including Greece and Italy. There are serious issues to be addressed and the pressure is beginning to take its toll on political leaders. People everywhere are continuing to worry and wonder just what might happen and how long it might take before things get back on track; but few are prepared to question the economic system upon which we operate.

Which brings me to the second issue this week of global climate change. On Tuesday just after midday, the senate passed the Carbon Taxes in legislation called the "Clean Energy Future" bills. It's fair to say there is still much controversy around this particularly by some economists and political parties, but the Uniting Church has given its support to say that the economic system must change to reflect the long terms costs to the planet. One thing is certain - this planet cannot sustain all of humanity if it were to live to the same average living standard as we do in Australia. In fact we would need 9 planets to achieve that. These are uncertain times and there are many lower case 'g' gods vying for our attention.

In this sense I wonder if our world is not so different from the community to which today's passage from the Gospel is written. The parable is located in the eschatological discourse; that is the later chapters of Matthew as the author sets the scene of what it is to wait for the end of the age and the coming of the Lord or the Kingdom of Heaven. Like all parables in this section it exemplifies the certainty of the Lord's coming and how the disciples are to live in the mean time.

This is a well known parable and one that continues to challenge us as we grapple with its meaning. What is clear is that all are entrusted with his property and that each of the three slaves is accorded a significant sum of money. The commentators would suggest a talent is worth around 6000 denarii where 1 denarii is about a day's laborers wage. Others would say it is about 25 kilograms of gold. No matter how you translate it, in today's figures it is a huge amount of money probably in the region of 15 to 20 years average wage....in other words likely to be more than a million dollars a talent.

Like the preceding two parables the return of the master is certain but the timing is uncertain. After a long absence, he returns to discover what each servant has done with his allocation. The first two slaves do business with the master's talents and double his money. They have been given no instructions and we are not told how they invest the money. They have performed according to their potential, and they have been faithful to do what the master has required of them. The master's response to each is the same. They are praised and entrusted with more and they get to enter into the joy of the master.

The third servant is in for a surprise and the audience learns even more about the master. He is a man who reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he has not scattered seed. This third servant is reprimanded for failing to invest the money with the bankers so that he might have gained interest; a practice forbidden in Exodus 22 and Leviticus 25. The master's willingness to earn money at the expense of others challenges any allegorical interpretation of the parable that would directly correlate him with Jesus, who never acts in a manner to seek personal gain. That a wealthy landowner however would behave in this manner makes the story all the more compelling.

The third slave admits that he was afraid to lose the master's money. To protect himself, he buried the talent in the ground. Although this may seem odd to audiences today, burying treasure was quite common at this time.

The master is angry as he had entrusted this servant with a portion of his property in order that the slave would use his abilities; abilities that had helped the master in the past. This slave, however, was too afraid to take a risk; even though risky behaviour was part of the master's business. Instead, he attempted to secure his own well-being. In the end his unfaithfulness to carry on the master's work cost him severely.

In its literary setting, Jesus tells this story to his disciples to prepare them for the days ahead when their faith will be tested. This parable depicts how the disciples are to demonstrate their faithfulness as they anticipate the return of the Lord.

I Wonder... I wonder what does faithfulness look like in a time of waiting? In Matthew's Gospel faithfulness is emulating the ministry of Jesus. Jesus has announced the arrival of God's kingdom by feeding the hungry, curing the sick, blessing the meek, and serving the least; but wait we will likely hear more about this next week with the following parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

Read in light of the contrast of abundance and scarcity, hope and fear, the passage from Thessalonians is also good news, despite its apparent threat. As children of the day, we are called to walk in the light, trusting God and supporting one another. Remembering we are part of the body of Christ, that interdependent community in which our joys and sorrows, successes and failures are woven together, we discover that we have everything we need to be faithful to God and live abundantly. This is good news for congregations that worry about the future. From mustard seeds come great plants, and from five loaves and two fish a multitude can be fed. Faithful realism sees more than meets the eye, and trusts that nothing, not even our failures, can separate us from the love of God.

For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.
