

Zephaniah 1:7-16
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

Listening for the absentee Lord

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

How are we to do God's will when God's voice is so tiny. Elijah found this to be true. He expected to hear God in storms and earthquakes and cataclysmic events – stuff accompanied by big noises. Afterall, if God is so big it follows that God has a big voice. Not so, says Elijah. God speaks in sheer silence. No wonder I can't hear what God is saying. That, at least, is the complaint implicit in the one talent servant who buried what was entrusted to him and returned it to the master on his return. He complained that he knew what kind of man his master was and what he would expect and out of fear he kept the talent safe, buried in the ground.

This calls for a little bible study. There are a few things to say about the parable that could be helpful. There is another version of the story in Luke. Luke's version has quite a different feel but in this version one notable difference from the one in Matthew is that the master gives instruction as to what the servants are to do with the money. He said, 'Do business with these until I come back.' (Luke 19:13) The third servant wrapped the money in a cloth to return it but the master admonished him for not even putting it in the bank where he could have earned some interest.

The Matthew version of the story is the third in a series of parables that follow a theme. They are about waiting. There is the unfaithful slave who is behaving badly when the master returns. There are the foolish virgins who had run out of lamp oil when the bridegroom arrived. Then comes the absent master who returns to assess the management of his property entrusted to three servants.

Parables can be tricky. Sometimes we can see them as metaphors that depict what God is like. It seems reasonable to let the good Samaritan remind us of Jesus. It seems reasonable to do the same with parable of the lost sheep. Indeed, in iconography, the shepherd who finds the lost sheep is usually depicted as Jesus.

There is a temptation to make these connections in all Jesus parables but if we did that we would be considering divine attributes that belong better with inhabitants of Mount Olympus. The masters and the bridegroom in the three waiting parables are unreasonable and vengeful, not the loving and gracious God we have come to expect.

How interesting that Jesus told stories with main characters who shape the outcome of events in these parables who have values and personalities devoid of what we might expect to be divine attributes. How interesting that gospel writers reported these stories and expected their readers to derive lessons in them for being more faithful in their following Jesus. How perplexing that so many of these stories with characters who have just mist the point rather than being outrageously bad, who look like they have been treated unfairly, how come they are the ones that end up gnashing their teeth.

Remember, Matthew is the one who reports Jesus' words, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Some chapters later Matthew tells of someone who asked, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16) The two of the waiting parables in chapter 25 look like part of the answer to this except that the actual doing part is not spelled out, much to the misfortune of the foolish virgins and the servant entrusted with one talent.

Now, we who have sat under the scriptures and sound preaching all our lives Sunday by Sunday are fully aware that the juxtaposition vis a vis us and eternal life is not dependant on our doing but on what God has already done through Christ. The baptised are in Christ living in a sure and certain hope of eternal life.

What we must do is not our path to eternal life. Christ has already trod that path. Whatever we might do is in response to the gift of life. There is doing to be done. There is the leading of God to be heard and obeyed. Problem, the voice of God is very tiny. But, thanks be to God, the returning master who admonished the one talent servant for treating what had been given him as if it were dead by burying it gives a clue as to how to get round the apparent silence of God.

Indeed he taught him with his own words. As he flicked mud from the exhumed talent offered him by the lazy servant he said, "You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?" (Matthew 25:26) There it is. The absent master did not need to leave spoken instruction because those who had lived with him knew him and his expectations. Knowing the master informs the doing of obedient servants.

Matthew and his church knew the lazy servant's dilemma. Jesus was no longer with them in the flesh as he been before his death. He was not with them to teach and instruct and provide a living example of doing that befits eternal life. They were living in the waiting time of the absent Lord.

Followers of Jesus are entrusted with bearing witness to what God has done and is doing in Christ. Bearing that witness, doing what is expected calls for listening to a master who is present in the Spirit, but that kind of presence looks a lot like absence. So how can the faithful followers know what to do? Part of the answer is revealed in the parable of the talents. Those who know the master know what is expected. Knowing Jesus makes God audible. Knowing Jesus makes sense of the sheer silence of the voice of God.
