

In the last three weeks, we have been very busy in our churches here in Prince Edward North. Halloween and All Saints Day have been celebrated. We have once again remembered those who have given their lives for our freedom and celebrated the selflessness of many people whose sacrifice has enabled us to have the way of life we enjoy. Wesley has held a successful chili dinner. Friendship United's building is undergoing a transformation with the original stone walls once again in view as the pointing continues. Plans are underway for the annual church Christmas auction at Friendship.

This Sunday is the second last Sunday before Advent Sunday. We need to take our breath, relax and remind ourselves of God's goodness and grace to us and to all people. Prior to the onset of the Christmas preparations, we need to take stock of what we are about to do so as to maximize our enjoyment of the Christmas season and to be aware of our personal ministries to those near and dear to us.

Our readings this morning speak to our need as Christians to be vigilant in our faith and to never lose focus or momentum. They speak of the need for us to be conscious always of how we use the gifts and the personal talents that God has bestowed on us in such a way that we celebrate God's liberating spirit in our lives and in the lives of others.

In Paul's first letter to the Church in Thessalonica, Paul speaks of the times and the seasons. He is well aware that people are conscious of the time in which they live, of the opportunities and the perils of their days. Paul reminds them again that these present times can change very quickly and the peace they currently know can rapidly disappear. Be prepared for anything was his message; be vigilant; do not let down your spiritual guard; do not get sloppy in the faith; keep strong and follow God.

Paul knew that none of us will be aware of exactly when Christ will come again; we need to live as though we expect him any moment. Paul is speaking of the last days which they expected anytime but he is also reminding us that we never know when our own days will end. We can not afford to put off planning for it.

Paul speaks of Christians as those who live in the light; those who are out of the darkness of fear and anxiety; those who fill each moment with living rather than cowering and trembling with fear. Remember his words: "since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ...therefore encourage one another and build one another up."

Paul was trying to get the people of his day and the people of our day as well to be excited and at peace in their faith. His message is timeless; once you have found your faith in Christ, once you have confessed your sins and have asked for and received forgiveness of sins, you need to get on with living life to the fullest.

Do not be afraid; you now walk in the light of Christ and neither life nor death can separate you from the love of God which we have experienced in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul appreciated the ebb and flow of everyday life for men and women; he understood the pressures of the times and the seasons as the years went by. It was for this reason he encouraged folk not to miss Christ's coming by getting sloppy in their faith. Be alive, be alert, be prepared for the time schedule none of us knows nor will know. Each of us we will meet Christ and we will stand before God.

I love the image Paul presents of not just being prepared but the picture of what we will miss if we are not prepared. We can hear him say: Do not stand at the side as life goes by. Be in the parade as the King of glory comes and do not be missing in action. Be ready for God's call.

Our Gospel passage from Matthew carries on from Paul's theme of being active in our faith and not just observers of life.

The Parable of the Talents we read follows immediately the Parable of the Wise and the Foolish Maidens. Both of these parables of Jesus are useful for us to examine as we think of our theme of understanding our part in the time and the seasons of life. Both of these parables speak to our need to be vigilant as well as creative in the uses of what we have been given by our Creator God.

You will recall the first parable of the bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom to arrive. Some of them had brought extra oil for their lamps in case the bridegroom was late and others had not thought to bring extra oil. Naturally, the bridegroom was late, arriving long after he was expected to arrive. Those with oil in their lamps welcomed him. The others missed the event as they were away trying to borrow or buy more oil in the middle of the night. By the time they got more oil, the wedding was well underway and the doors locked barring them from the festivities. Because of their lack of preparation, they were not included.

This parable of Jesus was directed at the Jews who were the chosen people of God. All through their history they should have been preparing for the coming of the Son of God and thus be fully prepared for whenever or however he came. Instead they were unprepared to receive Jesus and therefore they missed out on the great event. To Jesus, this was the great tragedy of his people.

There are two warnings for Christian seekers who follow Christ in this Parable of the Wise and Foolish Maidens. First, it warns us that there are certain things which can not be obtained at the last minute. We all know from personal experience that you can not learn all the information from a study course if we only open the books the night before the final exam. A tradesman takes years to learn his craft and can not be skilled by one day's practice.

Jesus was telling us that it is the same with our relationship with God. It is easy to leave things so late that we have no remaining time to prepare to meet with God. Barclay reminds us of a story of Queen Mary 2<sup>nd</sup> of England who while still a young woman lay dying. Her chaplain sought to tell her of the way to salvation. She is said to have replied in these wonderful words: "I have not left this matter to this hour." In other words, she was prepared to meet God. It is always a tragedy when it is too late. How much better it is to be as prepared as we can be to meet God.

This parable also warns us that there are certain things that can not be borrowed. As the women found it impossible to borrow oil at the last minute, so men and women can not borrow a relationship with God. We need to possess it for ourselves. We need to know Christ as our personal Saviour and Lord. Just as we can not borrow character from others, we need to have won it for ourselves for it to be authentic and real. Tennyson had a great line; "There is no knell so laden with the tears of regret as the sound of the words 'too late'." Let us make sure we are not too late!

This parable is not dismissing the moments of realization of our sinful lives which some people have at the end of their life nor does it negate God's capacity to forgive and welcome the sinner at the last moment. What is does caution is the risk of this for we may not have the opportunity or the time at the end to throw ourselves on God's mercy. It just may be too late! Jesus would caution us to be ready, to prepare for this wonderful time in our life.

The Parable of the Talents also has lessons for us as it had for those who were hearing it for the first time from Jesus. You know the story. The owner gave talents of varying size to three servants. Now, a talent was not a coin but was a measure of weight, usually of silver. Whatever, a talent was a goodly amount of money.

The first servant was given five talents, the second given two and the third given one talent before the master went off for an extended period of time. When the master came back, he asked them what they had done with the talents he gave them. The servant with five had doubled it as had the servant with two. The last servant cowered in the corner and said he had hidden the talent in the ground. He then gave back to the master the original talent. The master, extremely pleased with the first two servants, was annoyed and dismayed by the actions of the third man. You could have at least deposited it in the bank and got some interest!

Clearly in Jesus' day when he told this story, all thoughts would be on this useless, cautious, afraid servant who had buried his talents rather than venture to use it. Clearly, Jesus was aiming at the Pharisees and the Scribes and their attitude to the Law and the truth of God. The useless servant took and buried his talent in the ground in order to give it back to the master exactly as he had received it. The whole aim of the Scribes and the Pharisees was to keep the Law exactly as it was. They opposed any additions or alterations to the Law and as a result opposed anything new. In this parable Jesus was warning them as he warns us that there can be no religion without adventure, and that God can find no use for a shut mind.

This parable also tells us that God gives men and women differing gifts. Some appear to have more than others. The amount of the talent is not what matters; what matters is how he or she uses it. God never demands from anyone more than they have the capacity or the abilities to do. However, God does demand us to use what we have been given. Though we may not all be equal in ability and talents, God does expect from all of us equal effort in using and growing what we have been given in trust from God.

Perhaps it is a surprise for us to realize from this story that the reward of work well done is still more work to do. Notice the first two servants were not thanked only to be told they could now rest on their laurels; no, rather they were given greater tasks and greater responsibilities. How do you feel about that ending? Had you thought it could get easier and less demanding this life of following Christ? Did you think there was a time out for good behaviour so to speak? Not so, said Christ. Well done good and faithful servant; go and reach out to more people as the hands and feet of God.

The parable tells us that the man who is punished is the man who will not try. Note that the servant with one talent did not lose his talent; he simply did nothing with it. Even if he had adventured forth and had lost it in trying, it would have been better than doing nothing with it. It is our temptation always to try to excuse ourselves to God by saying we have so little talent. Not so says Jesus. Use what little you believe you have; risk a little; use what you have for the common good of all and you will be amazed at the results.

Finally, we need to remember the end of the parable when the talent was grabbed away from the timid servant and given to the one who already had so much. This sounds unfair of God. Let us think about what this is saying, for I believe we do understand it. If a man or woman has a talent and exercises it by using it, he or she is able over time to do so much more with it. If however, a man or woman has a talent and fails to exercise it, he or she will inevitably lose it. We do know from our own experience and our observance of others that the only way to keep a gift or talent is to use it. We know this to be true whether it is a sport, craft, an art form or speaking.

Jesus' great lesson to us in this parable is that the only way we can honour God who gave us what talents and gifts we have is to use them in the service of God and in the service of our fellow men and women. Our faith needs to be exercised and tested in the day to day life in which we find ourselves. There are no excuses for losing our talents – we have just neglected to put them to work for the good of all.

The Christian faith is a very inspiring and uplifting one. It presupposes that the God who created in love, observes the world in love and responds to each of his creation with love and care really does exist. At the core of the faith is the example of Jesus Christ, how he lived, what he demonstrated, how he loved, how he prayed and how he submitted himself to death for the sake of all creation. The story never ends with death and annihilation but rather it ends with resurrection to life eternal.

Our Christian faith believes that all people, regardless of colour, sex, nationality, faith or creed are the creation of God and all are created equal in God's eyes. God is not waiting to be bribed into action but is a God who is an active participant in the world, a world so often in turmoil due to distrust, greed, power grabs, war and natural disasters. Yet the Christian believes that God laughs with us and cries with us and is often in despair of the world and the shallowness of many people of faith.

In the two parables today, we clearly have Jesus saying it is up to us. God has not preordained how you will act; he has not written the full life of each of us. Rather as in the two parables of Jesus we studied today, the question is how we prepare, how we build on our faith in God, how we use the talents we have been given and how we act out our faith in our daily lives.

All we have seen and believed assures us of the value of a living, dynamic, ever growing faith in God. Our God is a wondrous God indeed and worthy of our worship, our thanksgiving and our heartfelt praise.

Hallelujah and Amen

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