

The Absentee Landlord

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus has left the building. Well, this is the title of a book published in 2006 by the Canadian author Paul Vieira. It is about his experience of not finding Jesus within the walls of the institutional church and coming to the conclusion that God, whom we know in Jesus has left the church. Based on this conviction he himself has left the church he had served for many years before in order to follow Jesus 'in the world'. Like many of his contemporaries and perhaps some people we know, he felt he loved Jesus, but lost faith in the church and believed that God did too. We, who are in the church, would humbly agree that the church is not perfect and that there is much room for repentance and change within it, yet we do not believe that all this is to be done by walking out and searching for the living presence of the Lord somewhere else. As if God could only be in one place at a time. We cherish our church, we do feel that, what we find in the church: the love, fellowship, mutual caring, common purpose of our faith journey together, - is of crucial importance in our lives. But to argue for or against the premise of this book is not our purpose today. It was just the title of the book that came to my mind as I was reflecting on our Gospel reading we've just heard, the so-called parable of the talents.

In the story we hear about a landlord, who decides to go abroad and leaves great sums of money in his servants' care. We assume that the landlord stands for God, or as the first readers would hear it, for Jesus, who had died, rose again, ascended into heaven and on his return he would call people to account and establish God's Kingdom on earth. For some reason we automatically identify the powerful, authoritative figures, like kings, landowners or fathers with God and because of that we tend to understand Jesus' parables more in allegorical terms than in their own terms. If we did that with this story, we would have some problems. The first and quite major problem is that it would speak of *God as an absentee landlord*, someone, who sets things in motion and then goes away only to return much later to judge the 'quick and the dead' (2 Timothy 4:1).

This kind of understanding has long been a temptation for the followers of Christ. The early Church, like Matthew's church lived in the anxious times of mounting persecution and the need to cope with the delayed return of Christ, which they had expected to be imminent. And even after the Church had settled down for a longer wait, there were always crisis situations, when it was easier to believe in an absent God than to reconcile the turn of history with the presence of a loving and caring God. We are also living in just such times. Last Sunday we remembered the horrors of two World Wars and the many other wars that have scarred human history and claimed millions of lives. And now as the Covid-19 pandemic hit our world earlier this year, many questions have been raised in our minds about the kind of God we believe in. It wouldn't be surprising if sometimes we felt like Israel 'by the rivers of Babylon' as in their exile they were taunted by their captors, 'Where is your God now?'

Yet, when we think of Jesus' life, his teachings and his actions, the way he spoke of God, we cannot believe he wanted us to see God in this landlord. The God he showed us was about love and forgiveness, the call to repentance, the understanding of our fears and anxieties, our struggles and our failures, what's more the very presence in all our human predicaments. And in spite of some of the vivid descriptions of judgements and banishment from God's presence Matthew, the Gospel writer also believes in this abiding presence as he finishes his Gospel with the most hopeful of words. Words that we still cling to: 'I will be with you always to the end of times'.

The second problem is with the very title of the story, *The parable of the talents*. Because of the English usage of the word 'talent' usually refers to natural ability, aptitude or special gifting, we tend to think that this parable is about using our natural gifts in a profitable way. And, of course, this is a worthy thought and may encourage us to live our life

to its full potential. But if we take the original Greek word used here, we see that it simply means money, which is given according to and on top of the natural abilities of the servants. And if it is money then the landlord's demand for the greatest possible profit, sounds more like a description of how things are in the world and how things were in Palestine under Roman rule, than an example to follow. It makes the landlord a greedy and ruthless master, who 'reaps where he has not sown and gathers where he has not scattered', as the third servant observes.

When we hear those words, we cannot, but recall Jesus' parable about the sower, who does quite the opposite: he sows generously, abundantly and everywhere, having no care for the waste, because the seed he sows is so potent, so full of life that even a very little of it can produce enormous harvest in a fertile soil. So, maybe today's parable is neither about natural abilities nor about money, but as Matthew introduces it, it is about the Kingdom of God. What is translated as 'talents' could then be understood as something more like seed in the story of The Sower, or the oil in the lamp of the prudent bridesmaids in our reading for last Sunday: it is the energy and the very life of God within us specifically oriented towards the realisation of the coming Kingdom. This is good news for us, because, instead of giving us a guilt trip for not being profitable enough, it gives us hope that even the smallest of our efforts for the Kingdom carries great blessing and multiplies in the process because it is none other than God's very life flowing through us.

The third problem with our usual way of understanding this parable is its ending. It is to do with the third servant. Some commentators point out that whereas Matthew devotes 2 verses each to the dialogue with the two 'faithful' servants, the greater part of the parable (6 verses) is taken up by the case of the so-called 'useless' servant. His story ends with the words "*..everyone who has, will be given more till he has enough and to spare; and everyone who has nothing, will forfeit even what he has*". Well, I have to confess that, from a tender age I have always felt that this was the most unjust and most un-Christian saying in the Bible. It may be a true reflection of what happens in a profit-orientated society, and everyone at the bottom of that kind of society would readily agree with it, but where is the good news in that, if it is the same in the Kingdom of God? Didn't Jesus say that his purpose was 'to bring good news to the poor'? Didn't he dedicate his life and extraordinary powers to walk alongside those at the bottom of society? Didn't he say in the Sermon on the Mount that the greatest gift of all, the Kingdom of heaven would be given to the poor? The Kingdom cannot be about the impoverishment of anybody, let alone those who are already destitute. As Paul affirms it in his letter to the Thessalonians: "*God has not destined us for retribution but for the full attainment of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,*" (1Thess 5:9).

So, what about this third servant? What does he do? In a move contrary to the Imperial greedy ways around him, he refuses to join in. Apparently, in the honour and shame culture of the times, he does the only honourable thing by protecting someone else's property entrusted to him, rather than risking it for gain, which was regarded not just dishonourable, but against the ancient Laws. And he is the only one who 'speaks truth to power' and pays a heavy price of being condemned for it, - just like Jesus was, in fact. The servant recognises the true value of what he's been given and buries the treasure, just like Jesus was buried after having been condemned and thrown out. Can we hear the echoes of another earlier parable (Mat 13:44) here, in which the Kingdom is likened to a man, who finds and buries the treasure? Yes, the greatest treasure of all was buried only to be discovered with great joy on the third day as no longer in the burial place but at large ready to enrich the lives of all who would receive it. Let us give thanks for the love of God, that is not there to condemn, but in Jesus took all the condemnation humanity could heap on it, yet remained as strong and as invincible as ever. May the Spirit make us worthy of such a love. Amen