

Second Sunday before Advent Sunday 15 November 2020

Collect:

Heavenly Lord,
you long for the world's salvation:
stir us from apathy,
restrain us from excess
and revive in us new hope
that all creation will one day be healed
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

First Reading

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ²for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³While people are saying, 'Peace and safety', destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

⁴But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. ⁹For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁰He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Gospel Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents*, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' ²¹His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

²²And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' ²³His master said to him,

'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' ²⁶ But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Reflection

Throughout the ages people have grappled with the "Why are we here?" and the "What's it all about?" questions. What use am I to the world? What contribution can I make? If we don't, upon examination, see within ourselves any special talent or ability, it is easy to believe that we have no purpose. And our society arguably has far too many people who believe they are insignificant or second-class.

In the light of this, today's reading from Matthew's Gospel has a positive message for us all. The "master" in Jesus' parable gives to each of his slaves a different responsibility during his absence. Each is given a challenge that the master deems suitable for them. It is a responsibility to which, in the master's estimation, they are equal, and once he has departed it is up to each of them to figure out what they must do. What might the master expect of me? they are supposed to think. What opportunities are open to me, to do some good with the gifts that I have been given? The denouement of the story shows that some of the servants are more successful than others at fulfilling their obligations.

Ought we to feel sorry for the servant who gets it wrong and hides his one talent in the ground to keep it safe? Perhaps, but it rather misses the point. It is not the master's wrath that ought to preoccupy us, but the attitude of the servant in the first place. Does he follow the good example of the others around him? Is he inspired by their actions to greater ambitions for himself? Does he use the time he has been given to discern what might be required of him and put himself to productive work?

God gives each of us unique talents. We are made in the image of God, making each one of us, "self-portraits" of God. Each of us reflects a unique aspect of our creator, one which has never been seen before and will never be repeated. Each of us is therefore infinitely precious, and once we depart this earth it will for ever be deprived of that singular image of God, and bereft of the unique gifts and talents that God has given to us and us alone.

Prayerfully, we are to determine what task God would have us accomplish, and how God would have us participate alongside in this great work of creation.

Do I have significance on this earth? Am I not a bit anonymous in this sea of talented people I see around me, far cleverer than I am? Whoever you are, God gives you a unique task for which you, and only you, are perfectly suited. God has given you the gifts and talents to fulfil it. Rather than feeling anonymous, what you do with them has eternal significance. We were created for this purpose alone, to do God's will, and our challenge is to discern it.

Rev Jenny Ellis

*Archaeological note: A talent in the Old Testament was a measure of weight, but by the time of the New Testament it had become a unit of money and was the largest denomination in which money was traded (a bit like our old pounds, shillings and pence system). One talent was worth 6000 denarii. The denarius was equivalent to one day's basic pay for a soldier or labourer.