**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**November 15th - The 2nd Sunday before Advent**

**‘Opening the Door’ (Matthew 25:14-30)**

*Dear Friends,*

*We’d hoped, of course, that we wouldn’t find ourselves in this situation again, in which we once again cannot meet together to worship God in our church buildings, until at least December 2nd.*

*So, we’re back for a while to shorter-format online services, with contributions of readings, intercessions, hymns and worship songs from members of our Cranmer Group churches – we’re blessed to have a good number of spiritually- and technically-minded people both to do this, and then to record themselves doing it! Thank you from me to everyone who participates in our services in this way.*

*We are of course hoping and praying that we will be able to have Christmas services of some form in all of our six villages, but have to wait for further Government and CofE guidance. I’ll let you know about our service arrangements, once we have this clarity.*

*Meanwhile, you continue to have my prayers during this lockdown, especially that you keep physically, mentally and spiritually healthy.*

*With love from Clare, Esther and me, and God bless.*



**Rev. Tim Chambers
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The Lord be with you **And also with you**

**The Collect for the 2nd Sunday before Advent
(Common Worship)**

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.
**Amen.**

**Filled With Compassion**

**Played by Deb Hubbard**

Filled with compassion for all creation
Jesus came into a world that was lost
There was but one way that He could save us
Only through suffering death on a cross *God You are waiting
Your heart is breaking
For all the people who live on the earth
Stir us to action
Filled with Your passion
For all the people who live on the earth*

Great is Your passion for all the people
Living and dying without knowing You
Having no Saviour they're lost forever
If we don't speak out and lead them to You

*Chorus*

From every nation we shall be gatheredMillions redeemed shall be Jesus' rewardThen He will turn and say to His FatherTruly my suffering was worth it all

*Chorus*

**Bible Reading: Matthew 25:14-30 (New International Version)**

**Read by Mike Senior**

***The parable of the bags of gold***

*14 ‘Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. 15 To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. 16 The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. 17 So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. 18 But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.*

*19 ‘After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. 20 The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. “Master,” he said, “you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.”*

*21 ‘His master replied, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”*

*22 ‘The man with two bags of gold also came. “Master,” he said, “you entrusted me with two bags of gold: see, I have gained two more.”*

*23 ‘His master replied, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”*

*24 ‘Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. “Master,” he said, “I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25 So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.”*

*26 ‘His master replied, “You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? 27 Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.*

*28 ‘“So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. 29 For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. 30 And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

**Sermon: ‘Opening the Door’ – Rev. Tim Chambers**
In the four Gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus, there are a number of what have become known as his “hard sayings”. In some cases, “hard” because of our distance from them, both in terms of time and cultural difference; in others, because their meaning does seem to be genuinely obscure.

There are also several of the stories that Jesus told which perhaps are not “hard” to understand, but which we may think of – at least, at first glance – as “hard parables”. Hard, because some or all of the teaching of Jesus within them appears to be difficult; unpalatable in its message.

The sequence of parables that form chapters 24 and 25 of St Matthew’s Gospel contains several that could be viewed in this way, including this morning’s reading. The Church of England’s Lectionary for this brief season between All Saints’ Day and the start of Advent homes in on this series – the parable of the ten virgins; the parable of the bags of gold; and then that of the sheep and the goats.

Advent is of course a season of waiting; a time in which we prepare for the Christmas coming to earth of the infant Jesus. But in these three Sundays, we almost have “An Advent before Advent”. Christ teaches his followers through these parables the absolute importance of being ready not for the first coming of God to earth – the Son of God’ arrival in Bethlehem that first Christmas – but for the Lord’s second coming; the return of Jesus at the end of time, when, as a result of his self-sacrifice on our behalf on the cross, we can be reconciled once again with God, in spite of all that we do in our lives to turn away from Him.

So what does the parable tell us about making ourselves ready for the Kingdom of Heaven? What’s certain is that, if we’re not careful, because we may think we’re familiar with it, there is a risk that we make assumptions about what it’s telling us. It most definitely pays to look closely at the passage’s language.

The man going on a journey, of the story, is – perhaps obviously - our Heavenly Father. The theologian Tom Wright points out– especially since Matthew’s Gospel is written much more than the other three accounts of Jesus’s life, with a Jewish audience in mind - that the three servants represented very clearly to Jesus’s listeners the people of Israel, and their stewardship of all that the Lord had given them. But what applied to Jesus’s Jewish listeners then, applies equally to us today – we are right to identify ourselves with the man’s three servants.

As he goes off on his journey, the man entrusts his three servants with – in our contemporary translation - varying numbers of bags of gold. In the King James’ Bible, these are translated as ‘talents’ (the same word, of course, that we have in our contemporary usage, to mean a gift or a skill). These ‘talents’ were, by the standards of Jesus’s listeners, vast sums of money. One talent was roughly equal to fifteen years’ wages for a labourer. Three talents were a lifetime’s earnings; five, way beyond the total quantity of money that a regular person would encounter in their entire life. The man is entrusting each one of his servants, whether they receive five, three or even one talent, with great responsibility.

It’s notable, too, that the sense of these “talents”, these “gifts”, is not just gifts in a spiritual sense, tempting though it can be to think of them solely in this way. The word’s meaning is much broader than that, encompassing everything our Heavenly Father gives us – our skills in our jobs; our gifts as spouses, parents or friends; our abilities on the sports pitch, or in the concert hall; and, potentially, also the material resources with which He blesses each one of us too.

Furthermore, the three servants are given differing amounts of talents – the distribution of these gifts is unequal. But, as Jesus makes clear as he continues with the story, those who concentrate on the fewer things with which they are gifted, are valued just as much as those whose reach, so to speak, is wider.

“After a long time, the master of [these] servants return[s], and settle[s] accounts with them.” Jesus brings us back sharply to the point to which we all, ultimately, are headed; to when he, “the master”, will return once again, and each one of us will stand before him, to answer for what we have – or have not – done with all that we’ve received.

The good news is that, in all of this, it’s not about how many gifts we may have been given – that’s God’s business, not ours. We cannot all be a Beethoven or a Bradman, a Fonteyn or a Frink.

What matters – and what is our responsibility – is how we use these gifts with which we have been entrusted. And that, I suggest, is the nub of this parable. God, like the master going on his journey, places his trust in each one of us, that we will – in the parable’s words – “put to work” for the purposes of His Kingdom all that we have been given, however relatively great or relatively small this may be.

In the case of the first two servants, this trust from the master in them, elicits a trusting response from them – a trust, essentially, in the goodness of God, and ultimately of His purposes and plans for those who place their trust in him. They invest what they have been given, and double its value.

The master’s responses to the first two servants are identical. The word-for-word equivalence of these verses, 21 and 23, is important - it shows the master’s disinterest in the actual amounts each of them produces, just as in the parable of the workers in the vineyard, back in chapter 20 of the same Gospel. The most fundamental reward for the stewardship of each servant is the same: in return for their “goodness” and “faithfulness”, and therefore what they’ve produced in return, for their master, they are both invited to “come and share in your master’s happiness.” They – and we – are invited from the drama of the parable into the actual life of the Kingdom of God.

The “hard” element of the parable, of course comes in the way in which the third servant is treated by the master. It is deeply uncomfortable and challenging reading for us, as it would have been to many who heard it directly from Jesus himself. Our imaginations immediately hook onto the vividness of the imagery – “throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

No question; this is a reality check for us. God does not guarantee that all, regardless of how we respond to the gifts we are given, will be invited to “come and share in our master’s happiness”.

But I also believe we can take comfort from all that we know of the nature of our loving God, as revealed in Scripture and most especially in the person of Jesus Christ; the nature which the third servant fundamentally fails to understand, and which is at the root of his downfall.

The God whom he describes is absolutely not a God I recognize. The servant speaks of “a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed.” He responds not in trust, repaying the trust that God has placed in him, but in mis-trust and in fear; fear of his imagined God of poverty and selfishness, not the God whom we can know, who is – even in these very difficult times that we currently face - the God of abundance. The God who, in the words of St. Paul to the Ephesians, “is able” - through us, since we are the means through which His Kingdom is brought about on this earth – “to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us.”

I’ll close with a story of a life of apparently minimal talents, not to say considerable ill-fortune, but which shows the impact of a life lived in goodness and faithfulness, in the return that can come about through these, in the economy of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Alphonsus Rodriguez was born in 1533 in Segovia, Spain. By the time he reached his mid-thirties, he’d lost his wife and all of his three children, and been brought to financial ruin.

His thoughts turned to joining a religious order, but he was turned down due to his age and lack of education. Eventually, he having been accepted as a lay brother, he went to live the rest of his life in a Jesuit College on the island of Majorca, where he served as a porter and doorkeeper for the remaining 46 years of his life.

He was never accepted fully into the order, but he turned door-keeping into a sacramental duty. Whenever the doorbell rang, we would say, “I’m coming, Lord!” and would then welcome each and every visitor, as if he were welcoming Christ himself.

But not only did he do this, as Alphonsus opened the door day after day, he became a source of counsel to many of the brilliant young priests who studied at the college. He was especially influential in encouraging a young man by the name of Peter Claver to go and serve God in the Spanish colonies in what is now Colombia. Peter Claver became recognized as a hero, and later a saint, for his ministry amongst the tens of thousands of African slaves who were transported to work in South America.

And indeed Alphonsus Rodriguez, the door-keeper, was also made a saint, recognized for his own brand of quiet heroism, expressed in a life of humility, hospitality and friendship, that – through those whom he discipled - changed the world.

“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”

I pray that we too, in trust and in goodness, will put our gifts to work for the purposes of our loving God, and in so doing, receive that same invitation too…. In Jesus’s name I pray, Amen.

**Intercessions**

**Led by Patrick Newton**

Lord, settle our minds now as we pray to you for our needs and for guidance. We thank you for sending your Son Jesus Christ to live among us and sacrifice his life for us. May his life be an inspiration to us and encourage us to use the gifts you have given us for the purpose of extending knowledge of our faith throughout our community and our world. Give us the courage and generosity to share our gifts in the service of God. Thank you for all you have given us – for our family, our home, our jobs, our health, our abilities and our wealth – we pray that we may use them for your good.

Lord, in your mercy,

**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for your church and for its leaders in this country, may they show us wisdom and inspiration by their example and sacrifice. We thank you for our Queen who has always used her privilege to demonstrate a life of service as part of her Christian faith – pointing our nation towards Christ our Saviour.

We pray that our politicians use the power of their position to make wise decisions for our welfare and for care for your planet.

Lord, in your mercy,

**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for our local church here in the Cranmer Group. We thank you for the centuries of faithful service of our ancestors and the beautiful heritage of the churches we have in our villages. It is our time now to use our talents to take up the witness for Christ in our community in our lifetime. We thank you for our Vicar Tim as he guides and inspires us with his energy and enthusiasm – we pray that he may have the resources and help to have a lasting impact on our community. We pray for Clare as she supports him in this role – we pray for their health. We also pray for our Benefice Council that meets in the coming week – may the discussion be fruitful, and the decisions made lead to greater outreach of your Christian community in our villages.

Lord, in your mercy,

**Hear our prayer.**

Dear Lord We remain in this strange and alienated environment of lockdown with the covid pandemic. Thank you for the hope that news has given us this week of a vaccine not far away. We think of all those working in the NHS at this time and pray for your protection. We pray for all those who have lost their lives to this virus and for the many who are ill. Comfort their families and give strength and resolve to the people of our nation to follow government guidance and protect lives. We pray that the new vaccines will be effective and that in the meantime we can find joy in connecting with people in different ways. May each of us do our part to connect with the isolated and lonely within our community.

We take a moment of silence now to think of those we know who are ill or have lost their lives…………..thank you for the knowledge and comfort of your eternal kingdom and the place you hold for each of us there. Give us the faith and certainty of the knowledge of you as our Saviour and our truest friend. Help us to lean on you and know you are always there for us, just waiting for us to welcome you.

Lord, in your mercy,

**Hear our prayer.**

Dear Lord, as fear and uncertainty worries our country, let us choose love.

And during this time when we may not be able to physically wrap our arms around each other, let us yet find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbours and friends. In this lead up to Christmas may each of us find ways to use the talents you have given us to connect with friends, family, neighbours and even strangers. And let us remember you reign over all things.

Lord, in your mercy,

**Hear our prayer.**

 **The Lord’s Prayer**As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**The Collect for the 2nd Sunday before Advent
(Book of Common Prayer)**

O Lord, we beseech thee, absolve thy people from their offences; that through thy bountiful goodness we may all be delivered from the bands of those sins, which by our frailty we have committed: Grant this, O heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake, our blessed Lord and Saviour.
**Amen**

 **King of Glory, King of Peace
Played by Sarah Hadfield**

King of glory, King of peace,
I will love Thee;
And that love may never cease,
I will move Thee.
Thou hast granted my request,
Thou hast heard me;
Thou didst note my working breast;
Thou hast spared me.

Wherefore with my utmost art
I will sing Thee,
And the cream of all my heart
I will bring Thee.
Though my sins against me cried,
Thou didst clear me;
And alone, when they replied,
Thou didst hear me.

Seven whole days, not one in seven,
I will praise Thee;
In my heart, though not in Heaven,
I can raise Thee.
Small it is, in this poor sort
To enroll Thee:
E'en eternity's too short
To extol Thee.

**A Closing Blessing**

Christ our King
make you faithful and strong to do his will,
that you may reign with him in glory;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you & remain with you always.
**Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
**In the name of Christ, Amen.**