



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 28A, NOVEMBER 19, 2023

ZEPHANIAH 1:7,12-18; PSALM 90:1-8,12; 1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11; MATTHEW 25:14-30

WE ARE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS!

Matthew 25:14-30 [Jesus said, "It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then 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.' His 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.' And 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.' His 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.' 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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' 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? 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. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"]

One winter's evening in 1996, I was working a bit late. As I was getting ready to

leave, there was an almighty, otherworldly sound, unlike anything I'd ever heard

before, my ear drums seemed to push in, the air pressure changed, it got really heavy. I stepped out of the interior office I'd been working in, into a scene of utter destruction. All the windows on one side of the building had been blown out. There was glass everywhere, car alarms were going off, sirens blaring. It was a Friday night, so there were, mercifully, very few of us still in the office.

Outside, was surreal. Dust and debris all over the road and sidewalks, multiple helicopters circling, their spotlights scanning the ground, instructions being barked over loudspeakers. People wandering, dazed. It was a massive IRA bomb, a lot of people had been injured, two were killed.

All the roads were closed, the tube was shut down, so everyone left in the area (I was working in the Docklands area of London, just east of the City of London), dock workers, bankers, TV folks like me, shop-workers, lawyers, market traders and truck drivers all congregated in the nearest pub.

The landlady there was calling everyone inside, her husband was passing 'round trays of scotch, sandwiches were being

made, everyone was talking, checking in on each other. *Here* were all kinds of people – people, who in London, at that time, would never have been even in the same building together – all these people were sat together, around tables, talking. Together. Responding to what had happened, together. In the midst of the devastation, professional and class boundaries dissolved, generational, and gender separations were gone. We were all in this together. I had never felt such connection to strangers. Any fear I'd felt, was gone.

I felt safe with these people, protected from whatever was "out there" by this randomly assembled group that had become instant community. Consoling and connecting hugs were freely given, conversation freely flowed, money was being freely shared, food freely offered. The scene outside and the moment in time was apocalyptic, yet the scene inside, the response, was one of deep assurance.

I'd caught a glimpse of what my grandparents used to talk about: their memories of wartime when everything was different, years when nothing was "normal." Their memories of being bombed out, of losing everything over and

over again. Of hunger. And yet of love. The response to the horror, for so many, was depending on neighbors, sharing all there was, there was trust. The six long years of war, death and destruction, totally disrupted “normal” life and revealed, laid bare what cannot be lost: the capacity to love and to share, to be in it together and feel what it is to truly share a moment in time, *share* in the truth of being alive.

Situations, events, that no one would choose for themselves, can become gift-bearers, offering up treasured new understandings, insights, revealing what life really is, what remains when all else is taken away. Serious illness, imminent death, the impact of a devastating accident, these are apocalyptic life events, bringing “normal life” to an abrupt end and perhaps revealing truth ... in the love and care of a medical team, or a community gathered around in love. What was important no longer holds meaning: life’s clutter of accumulated distractions, swept away, replaced instead by what it is to acknowledge our complete dependence on one another and on God, and to love.

Covid brought extraordinary circumstances to millions around the

world. The pandemic brought with it incalculable grief with the losses endured by so many, and significant disruption to “normal life” – there was much said at the time that perhaps this experience, this shared experience might just change things, maybe the pandemic’s taught us something important, maybe we’ll start doing things differently, live more intentionally, more lovingly, care for one another just a little bit better.

And then, for many of us, life goes “back to normal.” That which had been so strikingly revealed is hidden again. And the world goes on turning...

Our gospel reading today is the second of the two parables that follow Jesus’ apocalyptic discourse in Matthew. In much the same vein as today’s reading from Zephaniah, Jesus speaks of a time of great desolation, of suffering, of war and destruction, famine, and earthquakes. Jesus speaks to the inevitability of suffering in this life and that it is entirely unpredictable, no one knows when it will happen, Jesus tells us, but it will happen. It’s in the context of this discourse, that Jesus goes on to teach us the wisdom of preparing, last week we heard the parable of the Bridesmaids, that

we might be ready for what is coming ... but what about when it's business as usual. What about when life, this life freely and abundantly given, is ours to just get on with, to live?

In a world where some have so much and so many have so little, in this life which brings such great suffering to some while others seem to have it all, it can be easy to feel that life's not fair. And so fear of what *might be, might happen* can drive our decision-making, fear makes us risk-averse. We can limit ourselves, our lives, play it safe; essentially "bury" the abundant wealth we have, the true wealth that is our freely given life, we can stick it in a hole in the ground and keep what we have unchanged, seemingly "safe." ... But we are followers of Jesus!

A few chapters back, in Matthew, Jesus tells us that "Those who want to save their life will lose it." ¹ Suffering in this life is inevitable, yet the mini-apocalypses of our own lives, and the larger ones we share, can be revelatory. They reveal the way we can be, the way we can live together, can care for one another. They reveal the ways we can

feed, shelter, love one another. They reveal ways to know God, only now visible because everything else is gone. They are a signpost to the Kingdom reality.

Jesus calls us to be healers of this world, to be active participants, to live fully. Jesus calls us to take this life and do something with it, to bring about the world we long for, one in which all are fed and sheltered, one in which there is true justice and abundant love, and an end to war and an end to killing.

This life is a gift, we don't own it or possess it, it's a gift from our Creator God and it's been entrusted to us for just a while. It's a gift we've been given to put to work in the world, to grow in love and care. **We are followers of Jesus!** And Jesus tells us that those who lose their life for his sake will find that what's left, when everything else has been swept away, what's left is worth the most, what's left is the true wealth we're called to grow!

¹ Matthew 16:25