

# The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

## Fr Peter's Homily for The Thirty Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) 19<sup>th</sup> November 2023

The parable in today's Gospel reading is so familiar, that we need to make ourselves stop and read it carefully. Two servants are rewarded, it seems, for doing what the Master wanted, while the third is punished for failure. But what has he done wrong? He kept the property safe; he was, as each is given talents according to his ability, the least able of the three anyway. And the Master never said the servants had to make money from the property left with them, he just entrusted it to them. It's hard not to feel a little bit sorry for him. And what is the nature of the reward that the successful two are given, what does 'come and join in your master's happiness' mean?

I'm going to cheat a bit here. I looked up this passage in the new translation of the scriptures that we will be using from this time next year. There we read a slightly different (and probably more familiar) version of the Master's reward: 'Enter into the joy of your Lord'. So what if this is, in fact, not a reward bestowed for good service: what if, in fact the Master is saying to the first two servants, the consequence of your good service is that it will lead you into my joy? He isn't just favouring them with something as a gift, but saying to them 'what you have done has brought you into the joy of your Lord – this result flows naturally from faithful service'.

And perhaps, when we are told this is a parable about the kingdom, this is the message it has for us. If we are faithful in making the most of what we are given, if we are faithful in grasping the opportunities we are given and the abilities we have, if we make it our constant struggle to be the best that we can be, to make the world richer, brighter and better, then the joy of the Lord will be ours: not as a reward bestowed for good service, but as the inevitable consequence of living life well. If we want to find joy in life, searching for it is fruitless and counter-productive: it will lead us into a dead end. But if we throw ourselves into life, into all its challenges and its opportunities, then joy will creep up on us, the joy that is the special mark of the heart of God.

What did the third servant do wrong? Well, in a sense he did nothing – and that was the problem. He was too timid (and again, at the risk of seeming cheeky, the words 'you wicked and lazy servant' are often translated as timid, hesitant). The first two servants take some risks by throwing themselves into the Master's work. The third servant is too timid to take any risks at all. It is not so much laziness that is his fault, but fear of failure. He is too frightened of failing, so he does nothing; and having done nothing he will not know the joy of a task performed well, of resources used wisely, of remarkable things achieved. His life has turned sterile, dry and unproductive, and the consequence of such a life is darkness – as dark as the pit in which he buried the talent.

The story begins with a task given to three servants. Two of them rise to the challenge and become more than servants, they become sharers in the Master's joy: more like sons than servants. The third becomes less than a servant, as he has not served at all. It is a parable of growth and change. As such, like all the parables it asks us some questions. What is the use that we are making of the gifts the Lord has given us? This means more than just skills and talents (in

the more normal sense) important as it is to use them wisely. Do we grasp the opportunities for good that life presents us? Am I making the most of my talents and my opportunities, am I seizing them (even if there is some risk involved, risk of failure, or rejection, or being laughed at)? The servants in the parable are expected to act on behalf of the Master, to act with his goods as he would have acted: two of them did so, one was too afraid and didn't. We are summoned, as baptised Christians, to act on behalf of Christ, to act as he would act, to speak as he would speak – to be his presence in the world.

Do I want to be a son, or a slave?

Am I so afraid of failure that I do not make Christ present in the world, either through my words or my actions?

Do I use the skills and gifts that I have to act as Christ would act, to speak as he would speak?

Do I seize the opportunities that come my way, the encounters with others or the moments of need and of challenge to act as Christ would act, to speak as he would speak?

When was the last time I did something remarkable, something beautiful, for God?

Is it my hope, my desire and my longing to hear, at the end of my life, the Lord's words 'Well done, good and faithful servant: enter into the joy of your Lord'?