

**Hexham Trinity Methodist Church**  
**Sunday 15th November 2020 - 10:30am**  
**Sermon**

Reading: Matthew 25:14-30

Prayer

A neighbour was telling me the other day that it was only 49 days till Christmas! He went onto say that his son had suggested that 49 days gave them just enough time to have two advent calendars, one for the 25 days up to advent and one for the 25 days of advent! I didn't have the heart to tell them that advent is actually 26 days this year from Advent Sunday on 29th November to Christmas Eve on 24th December!

Technicalities aside the idea of preparing for advent to help us in advent prepare for Christmas is not too far fetched an idea, although not one normally expressed with two advent calendars! In the pattern of readings for the Church year the gospel readings for the last few Sundays before advent draw our thinking and reflecting to the Kingdom of Heaven and in particular remind us that Jesus will return again. If you like they bring us full circle in the story which began a year ago in advent as we prepared for Jesus' birth. The last Sunday before advent, next Sunday, is known as Christ the King Sunday when we celebrate that Christ is King overall, the living and the dead. Then on Advent Sunday we begin the circle again as we return to the preparation both to celebrate Jesus' birth and for Christ's return.

In Matthew's gospel we are helped to think about the Kingdom of Heaven through three parables which Jesus told and which are recorded in Matthew 25. The first is the parable of the 10 virgins, which Richard Porter preached on a fortnight ago, the second is today's reading the parable of the bags of gold or talents and the third is the parable of the Sheep and the Goats which Paul Dunstan will preach on next Sunday. Each of them help us to understand more of the Kingdom of God but each of them teaches us something slightly different. As with all parables it's important to remember they are stories that we draw understanding from, that each of us will hear different nuances because that's what stories do and that what we take from one story needs to be laid aside the understanding we get from other parts of the gospels and scripture as a whole.

The parable of the bags of gold or the parable of the talents as it is often called helps us in particular to think about the Kingdom of Heaven before and after Jesus' return. An insight which I find particularly helpful as that's the time we are living in as God's people today.

To help us understand what Jesus is trying to teach through this parable I want to look at the structure of parable so that we can understand the different stages of the Kingdom of Heaven, which are shared in the parable, and then to look at a few of the verses which might seem like

they don't tell us very much but in fact help us to understand the parable and what God might be saying to us through it.

The first verse that helps us to understand the structure of the parable and the different stages of the Kingdom of Heaven is v14 which says *'Again, it will be like a man going on a journey.'* The verse begins with *'again'*, what is it that we are talking about *'again'*. To answer that question we have to look back to v1 which begins *'At that time the Kingdom of Heaven will be like ...'* So here in this parable we are again being taught about the Kingdom of Heaven just as the parable about the ten virgins did. Both parables are also telling those who heard them first what it will be like in the future, *'it will be like'* they say. What I find interesting about the parable of the bags of gold/ talents is that the Kingdom of Heaven will be like a man going on a journey, not just like a single moment but a journey, with different stages to it.

After Jesus establishes this is another parable about the Kingdom of Heaven we move to part 1 which is the time before he goes on his journey. I think this part of the story represents, for those hearing the parable, the time they were in, the time when Jesus was with them when he is telling them and showing them what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about. When we come to the end of v15 the man goes on his journey, not a short journey for we are told in v19 that he returns after a long time. I think the journey for Jesus is the journey to his death, resurrection and resurrection life. This makes sense when we look where this story is place in Matthew's gospel just before the chief priests and elders start to plot against Jesus in chapter 26. The journey, which takes us through Jesus death and resurrection marks the opening of the Kingdom of Heaven to all which is made possible through his death on the cross and rising to new life. The kingdom which is here and now although we are all too aware it is not yet complete.

In v19 we then come to the end of the man's journey as he returns to those he has given the bags of gold to. The return represents the moment when Jesus will come back to earth from heaven, when there will be a time of judgement, as we see in all three of these parables, and when the Kingdom of Heaven will be complete and everything that is not of God will be gone.

So in this parable we see those different stages of the Kingdom of heaven from when Jesus says what it will be like, to it coming into being for through his death and resurrection, to the moment when all there will be is the Kingdom of Heaven for eternity for those who choose to follow Jesus. Our part of the journey at the moment is of course whilst the man is on the journey in the now and not yet of the Kingdom, where we are like the servants in the story, the servants of God who have been given those bags of gold or talents.

Let's see what the sometimes passed over verses in this story tell us about how we can live as those who have been given the bags of gold by Jesus and wait for the time when he will return.

I wonder what you think the bags of gold or the talents are? In the story one man is given 5 bags, one 2 and one 1. What do you think they were or represent? Well a poll is going to appear on your screen and we'll see what everyone thinks from the three possible answers:

**Poll 1: What did a bag of gold/talents represent?**

- a) The natural gifts we have?
- b) Land to grow crops on?
- c) 15 years wages as a labourer?

So lets see what people think ...

Each talent/each bag of gold in the story represented 15 years wages as a labourer. This were significant amounts of money. More than any of the people in the story would ever have had as servants. A bit like winning the lottery for most of us. I wonder what they might represent for us today though, what might speak to us as we think about what God has given us.

I think the natural assumption is the gifts and talents that we've been given but for me when I think about what God has given us to live in this now and not yet time is our salvation faith, the gift we have as Christians is knowing that we are children of God, as John's gospel puts it that those who believe in him have the power to become children of God. If I think about the gift beyond my imagination or money beyond my imagination all of that pales into insignificance compare to the gift of being a child of God. From that of course flows the gifts of the spirit, the gifts God gives us but for me the gift beyond measure if not money, or gift but being a child of God and as a servant of God what I do with that gift.

So another question? How many talents would you have wanted to be given if you were in the story?

**Poll 2: How many talents would have wanted to be given?**

- a) 5
- b) 2
- c) 1

Interesting ...

I wonder why you answered as you did?

I think the bit of the verse that is often missed here is in verse 15b when Jesus says '*each according to his ability*' I think those few words really clarifies what is going on here. This isn't a test where the man gives more to see whether the men will manage, the man, God in the parable, gives the number of bags of gold that the man know the servants have the ability to use and

duplicate. Do you notice though the man doesn't invite them to take the number of bags of gold or talent that they think they have the ability to handle, he gives as he knows their ability to be. I think it is the same as children of God. God calls us to do many different things and often we feel there is no way that we can do what God calls us to, but if God calls, if God asks us to use our money or time in a particular way God will only ask if it is within the abilities that we have or that God will equip us with.

In verse 19 the man then returns as we know one day Jesus will return. One of the phrases used for the day is the day of reckoning and you can see how that might have come from this parable.

Another question then. If one man had made 5 more bags of gold and the other 2 should they both be treated the same?

**Poll 3: If one man had made 5 more bags of gold and the other 2 should they both be treated the same?**

a) Yes

b) No

Lets see what people think ...

In the parable as the man asked the servants what they have done with what he has entrusted to them there are only two responses, there are three men but only two responses.

In verses 21 and 23 the men who had 5 bags of gold and 2 bags of gold are both given the same reward. *'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!'* The reward for doing as God asks is the same, how much we make, how much we do isn't what's important, what's important is that we've done as God asked with what God entrusted us with. It may seem unfair to us but of course we look at things from a worldly perspective, the reward here is God's reward and a Kingdom one not an earthly one. If we do as God calls the reward will be the same for us all. There is another parable about this called the labourers in the vineyard which is all about the time of the day the labourers start work and the reward they get.

There is then a different response to the man who was given one bag of gold and came back with one bag of gold because he'd buried it in the sand. In verse 26 we read *"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? 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.'*" I think the most important words here are 'lazy servant' It is the lazy approach from the man given one bag of gold, the way in which he didn't even try increase what he had that the man condemns. The man knew that the

servant had the ability to take the bag of gold and make a difference, he know not to overwhelm him with 2 or 5 bags but knew he had the ability to cope with one, but he didn't even try. I would even hedge my bets and say even if he'd come back with nothing but had given it a go the man would have said 'well done good and faithful servant'

It's the same with God, we have an unmeasurable gift from God, the faith that we have, the salvation that we have, the fact that we are children of God. God calls us to live that faith out in this now and not yet time. How God asks us each to live our faith out will be different but what God asks is that we have a go, to not sit back and be lazy either expecting others to do what needs to be done or leaving undone what God wants to be done.

If God asks us to act for God, or asks us a community of Christians to act for God then we have a responsibility to go for it, to have a go, to see what happens. If it doesn't work out or it doesn't go as we think God wanted, that's OK, God will rework the plan or God will show us how it fulfilled God's purposes anyway. But if we just sit back and wait, wait for the day Jesus returns then the kingdom won't grow and the world won't be blessed.

The last verse I want to look at which might strike you as odd is verse 28 '*So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance.*' If each of these bags represents 15 years wages and the man already has 10, 150 years wages, why does he need another? Is what the parables telling us that the rich will be made richer with God?

I don't think so, I think if we think that the gift we have is faith, the gift we have received is to be children of God then I think this verse is all about deepening discipleship. As we discover more of God, as we serve God more and get more and more inline with where God is calling us then God shows us more and his love for us, God helps us to understand faith more, God gives us more of the same more of God's love, more of God's grace, more of God's purpose in our lives. If we are lazy and do nothing with what God has given us, nothing with the gift of life then we're not exactly showing interest or discovering more of it for ourselves are we.

This parable takes us through the different stages of the Kingdom of Heaven and gives us a glimpse of what each stage will be like. It focusses on the stage we are in now and invites us to think about what we do with immeasurable gift we've been given by God. For me all our gifts flow from the one eternal gift we have as Christians which is that we are children of God. But that gift calls for a response, being a child of God is not a passive or lazy life but an active life for God.

It is also not a life which is lived out in isolation of others, the man had three servants, God has millions of servants across the world. We are called to live and serve together as God's people, to support and encourage one another in the things God calls us to and to share the load. One of

things that strikes me in the story is that there were actually 8 bags of gold, not 5 bags of gold, 2 bags of silver and a bag of sugar for each person to do their own thing with. But 8 bags of gold, of the same gift, shared out in accordance with their abilities. I wonder what would have happened if man with 5 bags had put one down because he had too much today or was busy with other things, would one of the others have picked it up? Could they have worked as a team? These are all questions you can ask of the story. They remind us that God calls us together in community, God calls us as the church to worship, prayer, outreach, partnership and God has a part for everyone to play not just for a few who then feel overwhelmed whilst others do nothing.

The parable ends without a particular summary, conclusion or epilogue and it does that because the story stands in many ways on its own. I was tempted to do the same with my sermon, but no homiletics tutor would be impressed by that!

So instead I want to leave you with three questions to ponder now in a few moments of silence and then to take into the next week and beyond, into advent, Christmas and through to our covenant service in January.

- Do you know that the biggest gift you have been given is that you are a child of God, forgiven, loved and free?
- Are you putting that gift into practice for God at the moment?
- How might God be calling you, to work with others, to grow the kingdom of heaven using your gift as a child of God?