

## **Reflection for Pentecost 24 by Megan Cambridge**

Our readings today don't make for pleasant reading;

'the whole earth shall be consumed for a full and terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth'

'the Lord will come like a thief in the night....and there will be no escape'

'as for this worthless slave throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

The inspiration for some of the most grotesque and disturbing works of art (Michelangelo, Hieronymus Bosh, Luca Signorelli and many more) and meat for those 'fire brimstone preachers' of former years.

In the gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus tells the story of a rich man who left his slaves in charge of his money while he was away each being given a different amount. It is some time before he returns and, when he does, he demands an account of what they had done with his money. The first two invested the money and returned double the amount that they had been given and he is very happy with what they did rewarding them generously "Well done, good and faithful servants. ... Come on in and share my happiness". The third, who had been given the least, was afraid to do anything in case he lost it so he buried it and returned the same amount he had been given. The rich man was very unhappy and calls the servant "useless" and has him thrown out into the darkness "where he will cry and gnash his teeth".

This parable is a lesson about our attitude and responsibility, about stepping out with God's treasure in our hands and risking it all for the sake of others and for the sake of God. It's a parable of judgement. It is intended to stir us up and get us thinking and re-evaluating how willing we are to step out and to invest what God has given. The conclusion to the parable tells us that Jesus is deadly serious about this. "As for this useless servant—throw him outside in the darkness; there he will cry and gnash his teeth."

God has given us the world with all its wonder and beauty to live in. He has given us life, people to love us, and people whom we love. He has given us gifts and abilities in varying degrees. We could go on all day listing everything that God has entrusted us to use wisely.

The apostle Paul was confident that Jesus would return just as the rich man in the parable. He writes to the Thessalonians, "You yourselves know very well that the Day of the Lord will come as a thief comes at night. When people say, 'Everything is quiet and safe,' then suddenly destruction will hit them! It will come as suddenly as the pains that come upon a woman in labour" (1 Thess 5:2,3).

To describe Jesus as a thief seems just a bit strange but Paul isn't the only person to describe Jesus' return in this way. Jesus himself uses the picture of a thief coming at night and catching many people off guard. (Luke 12:39,40) and twice in the Book of Revelation we read, "I will come like a thief" (Rev. 3:3; 16:15).

Jesus is coming back; there can be no doubt about that. Our reading last week exhorted us to be prepared - Be ready for his return. Don't be caught out. The message that the New Testament gives is quite consistent. Jesus said, "Watch out, then, because you do not know what day your Lord will come" (Matt 24:42). It's like a thief – you never know when he will strike so be ready for when he does.

In Zephaniah (today's Old Testament reading) we read, "The Lord says, "I will bring such disasters on the human race .... (because) they have sinned against me." ... "On the day when the Lord shows his fury. The whole earth will be destroyed by the fire of his anger. He will put an end—a sudden end—to everyone who lives on earth" (1:17a,18). It a frightening picture and a salutary warning and we are urged to be prepared for it. St Paul goes on to tell the Thessalonians that God doesn't want any of us to suffer His judgment, but to receive salvation through Jesus Christ. He is saying first of all that it's not what we can do to make us ready but what Christ **has done** for us. He has made it possible for us to survive God's judgement. Jesus himself has made us ready for his return. We could never prepare ourselves, because we could not pay for our own sins. Jesus paid the price for us dying on the cross for us in our place. This is God's grace. Jesus gave us a gift we don't deserve. The question that we are left to consider is "How well am I using what God has given to me? When I am called to give an account of what I have done, what will I have to report?"

Just as the rich man in the parable, Jesus will return and he will want to know what we have done with what he has entrusted us. What have we done with the lives for which He died on the cross? What we have done with the Gospel, the Good News of forgiveness and eternal life? Have we received, treasured it and then buried it or have we used it to challenge and change the lives of people in our neighbourhood, family or wherever? Has the Gospel made any difference in the way we work, the way we relax, how we spend our money, how well we get on with others? Has the Gospel moved us to serve others less fortunate?

When you think about it, God has blessed us with so many gifts, by far too many to count. God has not been stingy by any stretch of the imagination. The idea, that God will call us to give an account of how we have used those gifts, challenges us to think about the gifts we have been given and our willingness to do what God wants us to do.

Whilst we may be able to face the Last Day with certainty and the assurance that all will be well for us because of Jesus Christ, as the rescued people of God, we have been given an important responsibility; to honour the

investment God has made in us and to use what he has given and to invest and reinvest in his kingdom and the lives of others.

As a Christian the challenge is: "Be all that God meant you to be!" Jesus has made it possible for us to survive God's judgement. He holds out to us the hope of salvation. Jesus has done the hard work for us. We are forgiven. The Holy Spirit prods us to respond with faith to the grace of God and believe that Jesus truly is the Way to eternal life. Only because of Jesus and his righteousness the Day of judgement becomes a Day of Salvation.

Three quick points in conclusion:

*Whatever gifts we have, they have been entrusted to us by God. Each gift is of value. No gift is to be despised. How we respond to God's generosity is crucial.*

*The gifts we have are to be developed and used. As they are developed and used, they will be enhanced and multiplied.*

*Used wisely and faithfully, our gifts will increase. Neglected and buried, they will decrease.*

A final word from St Paul; "Encourage one another and help one another". There is strength in facing these last days before Christ's return together. It's much easier doing it together as the body of Christ. Encourage one another. Support one another. Pray for another. Stand beside one another in trying times. Walk with one another when the journey is hard.