

SERMON AT 8.00 AM HOLY COMMUNION AT ST AGNES' CHURCH, FRESHWATER BAY ON SUNDAY 19TH NOVEMBER 2017 (2ND SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT) BY JAMES COOK

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11 and Matthew 25.14-30.

Title: 'Taking Responsibility'

Aim: To encourage us to accept and fulfil our God-given responsibilities.

Recently, I was asked to define what I understood by the terms 'The Kingdom of Heaven' or 'The Kingdom of God'. Biblical scholars regard the terms as interchangeable, Matthew preferring to say "Kingdom of Heaven".

The person who posed the question suggested her own simple and straightforward answer: "The Kingdom of Heaven is the place where God's will is obeyed."

I found her answer very helpful, and yet I found that I was still asking myself questions like, "What exactly is God's will for the society in which I live?" and "How do I determine the part I must play in fulfilling that requirement?"

In Matthew's Gospel, we find Jesus telling several stories or parables, in the days immediately preceding his crucifixion, which address such questions. These parables often begin with the phrase, "The kingdom of God is like..."

Last week, Remembrance Sunday, Jesus told the story of the ten bridesmaids, five of whom were not prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom. God's will, we learned, is that we should be ready at any time to meet Jesus face to face, whether on our death or on his Second Coming. Last week's simple message was "Be prepared!"

Like the story of the ten bridesmaids, today's story is a familiar one. Perhaps it is so familiar that we are in danger of not taking it seriously.

We recall that each of the slaves in the story is given a number of talents, and we think of natural gifts or aptitudes like painting, music, writing or mathematics. We admire those who have certain talents, provided they put them to good use; and we excuse ourselves from doing something for which we don't have a talent. "I'm hopeless at drawing," we might say, or "I just can't do sums in my head."

The talents in the story are different, however, they are investments. In ancient society, monetary value was preserved in large pieces of valuable metal, like bronze, which could be kept safe by burying them in the ground.

The modern equivalent, though of even higher value, would be silver or gold bars: bullion.

The rich merchant in the story places his investments in the hands of his slaves. He gives them not skills but responsibilities to do something worthwhile with his money. Like any modern investor, they are to earn a return by taking risks – the higher the risk, the greater the potential return. The slaves are not all given the same number of talents – the same number of responsibilities – but no one is without some responsibility.

What are your and my God-given responsibilities? What has God invested in your life and in mine? Many of us might once have been responsible for bringing up small children. Later, we might have been responsible for a home, a business, or part of some other organisation. If we are retired, we might now be responsible for an aged or sick relative, and so on. We might also be an active member of a club or society. Whatever our responsibilities, we know that we have to discharge them and we cannot ignore them.

What responsibilities have you and I been given in terms of God's Kingdom? What has he put into our hands, and what are we to do with what we have been given by God? How has God invested in each of us, and how are we to earn for God a return on his investment? The greater risks we take, the greater return for God that we might earn.

In the story that Jesus told, two slaves each earned a 100% profit on their master's investment – a considerable return by today's standards, so they must have taken substantial risks. The third slave took no risks at all. He buried his master's investment in the ground, where it was safe from being damaged or stolen, but it earned no return.

One Bible commentator I have read suggests that the Pharisees were people who would take no risks with God's great spiritual investment of the Law and the Prophets. They preserved their heritage, but they did not put it to good use. They would not get the spiritual truths and power out into the community of ordinary people, where it could do some good. Instead, they kept it locked away in their rule books, their uniforms and their rituals.

God has given each of us tremendous spiritual wealth in our knowledge of the Gospel, in our ability to know the Bible, to receive the Sacraments, to pray, to worship and to have fellowship with each other. God has revealed himself to us in his Son Jesus Christ, and he has placed his Holy Spirit within us. What are we to do with this enormous investment? Are we simply to hide it within the Church, for fear of taking risks, or are we to place it outside in the world, where it may earn a return for our generous and trusting God?

The story of the slaves does not end when the dividends on their master's investments are declared. Each of the slaves who have invested responsibly is given still more to

invest. God does the same with us. If we take risks with our spiritual investments for the sake of his Kingdom, God gives us even more responsibilities – even more resources for bringing about his will in the world.

Advent is approaching. Like Lent, it is a time to reflect upon the spiritual resources at our disposal and to put them to good use. May we be truly grateful for all that God has invested in us and may we take risks in the world outside in order to bring him his rightful return.

Then, at the Final Judgement, we shall hear God say, “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.” Amen.