

# **Sermon on Sunday 15 November 2020**

## **by Melanie Seward**

*(Readings: I Thessalonians 5. 1-11; Matthew 25. 14-30)*

### **What do we do now?**

No doubt as you listened to the Parable of the Talents, the three characters who are left alone by the property owner or Master, conjured up a range of images and evoked a variety of feelings in response to their decisions and actions.

Left with the responsibility for the Talents he gives to them, the slaves go about their business completely differently. Two put the talents to use and the third buries his talent in the ground, effectively doing nothing, and it is for this that he is lambasted. Doing nothing is not seen as an option by the Master. The explanation for this slave's actions is given by the slave himself – he was frightened of doing the wrong thing and getting told off. He acted out of fear, not love - because he did not understand the Master's true nature.

I guess that, as we find ourselves yet again in a period of strict Covid restrictions, we, too, react differently to our particular set of circumstances.

If you are studying at school, it might be difficult to concentrate and how you now have to act around the building might seem very odd. For those of us going into work, thinking constantly about what to do and how to do it is a strain on the nerves. For people at home, normal weekly routines and contact with friends and family have been interrupted. Maybe time is beginning to drag and frustration is setting in and it can become a decision about whether to withdraw and do nothing, or whether to fight against the negativity and increasing apathy as the weeks tick by yet again.

Even with the news of a vaccine on the horizon, normality seems a long way off. Lots of talk seems to be about 'putting life on hold' and waiting until enough vaccine can let life go back to 'normal'. The question is,

what do we do now? Because, as we have just read, doing nothing with the gifts we have been given is not an option.

Reading Paul's letter to the Thessalonians can help us. The early Christians in Thessalonica were being challenged, too. The Christians took no part in the cult of the Roman Emperor, instead they were preaching about a messiah and a coming kingdom. They did not show local affiliation by worshipping the local deity, called Cabrius, and they had converted several prominent women whom they considered as equal to men! In fact, the majority non-Christian population saw them as a possible threat to both political and social stability.

So, the Christians in Thessalonica were attacked for their beliefs. They were being ostracised, treated with suspicion, kept out of society. On top of this, they were struggling to understand some of the teachings, especially the idea of Jesus returning. They knew that judgement was involved and that everything would be made anew, but they were confused about what would happen to them and how they were supposed to wait for this to happen.

So, the Thessalonian Christians were asking: What do we do now? Paul's answer is not simply to believe and look to the future. Instead, he talks about living now. He says, stop worrying about the time and season when Jesus will return.

Like Jesus, Paul compares Judgement Day to the thief who comes in the night - when we are least expecting him. Paul says the timing of the return of Jesus is not ours to know, instead acknowledge that the future is not ours to control and live as every day might be that return. Live in the present. Be sure to avoid darkness - that is rejecting or being at a distance from God. Rather, be children of light and of the day - live in the present and live by faith in Jesus, God's son. Let Jesus shine his light into all the aspects of life. Live in the hope of salvation brought about by Jesus' death and resurrection that brings the everlasting life now but also in fullness beyond death.

Thinking about what Paul advised the Thessalonians, it strikes me that it is jolly good advice for us, too, in all kinds of ways. Living in the present, as if Jesus might return each day, means that life happens now, not in four months when it is Spring again, not in twelve months when we might have received a vaccine, not ... whenever in the future.

The life with Jesus is in the now. Be alert and live by faith, in love and with hope; continue to love one another, encourage and build up one another, now.

Just as the feeling of certainty about knowing the time of Jesus' return cannot bring peace, knowing the time and date of exactly when we will control the virus cannot bring real and lasting peace. No human-generated knowledge, no human institution can bring us this. Paul was very aware that, in his time, the Roman Empire's slogan was: 'Peace and Security' - this is what they said they offered as an Empire. In our time, political parties, investment firms, insurance companies and security firms use the same slogan: 'Our products will provide you with peace of mind and security on which you can depend'.

It's living a life trusting in Jesus that nurtures eternal peace of mind and inner security. Knowing we are loved by God, and acting in and out of that love, means going beyond just succumbing to Covid restrictions.

Living in the present, we reach out to one another, reach out to all people, in our neighbourhoods and across the globe. We will continue to work with Christ to build up individuals and communities; through prayer, through practical support, through the offer of friendship that comes with a phone call, letter or text, and, if appropriate and if we have the means, we will support financially.

Our choice in adversity is to respond to the challenge out of love and not act out of fear. Whilst we protect ourselves and others, we choose to reach out in the knowledge that the nature of the Master, Jesus Christ, is love.



Matthew 24. 42-43 42: *'Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.'*

Ephesians 5. 8-14: *'For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.'*