2nd Before Advent A: Zephaniah 1.7,12-18; 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11; Matthew 25.14-30

Cathy and I had a meeting with our financial adviser recently. On Zoom of course. And I was rather dreading it. The economy has had such a turbulent time recently that I thought that the Rhodes family fortune would have been badly depleted. Had it been down to me I might have been tempted to stick it all under the mattress. Which is why I am a vicar not a financial adviser. So many people are suffering at the moment and it feels as if that pain needs to be shared. And certainly our savings and investments have not grown all that much in the past year. But actually the news from our adviser was better than I had feared. The people who look after the Rhodes millions seem to have looked to the future. To have taken some intelligent risks. I’m not sure if they have invested in Zoom or Pfizer but they have put money into green technologies. Industries that will play an important part in the post Covid recovery.

In the midst of all the chaos and upheaval of the past year, some people are investing for the future. At St John’s we have been refurbishing the Parish Centre. Looking forward to the day when it can reopen properly and serve our community better. We have also used this time to restore the organ and that work is nearly completed. We are investing in technology to improve the way we stream our services. The Diocese is investing in new structures of ministry which mean that in addition to St John’s, I now have responsibilities at St Mary’s Walkley. And hopefully, the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, is investing wisely for the future, laying the foundations for a greener, more sustainable, economic recovery.

In today’s Gospel, a wealthy man distributes his property to his slaves. To one five talents. To another two and to another one. And then he goes away. And I think we can all identify with that sense of absence at the moment. We are separated from our loved ones. From the people who give us security. Some of us are separated from work. And if the rich man is God, we can all identify with that sense of him feeling a bit absent sometimes. It’s not a new feeling. In our first reading, the prophet Zephaniah addressed a people that had given up expecting God to return. They had grown complacent and sinful. But Zephaniah warned them that the day of judgement was near. Their wealth and property would be no protection from his wrath. And we are going to hear a lot about God returning in judgement in the next few weeks.

The Thessalonians in our second reading, were more expectant and hopeful of the Lord’s return but Paul warned them that it was not for them to know when that would be. The Lord would come like a thief in the night. But they were not to be fearful. As children of the light, he told them to keep awake. To encourage one another and build each another up. We can identify with that sense of not knowing when things are going to happen. What will things be like after 2nd December? What will Christmas be like? We have had some good news about a vaccine this week but we don’t quite know when that will be rolled out. Like the Thessalonians, we need to be open and hopeful, encouraging each other and building each other up.

Some have suggested that this parable was aimed very much at the disciples. Jesus was preparing them for his departure. When the rich man retuns, the first two slaves have doubled the talents that he gave them. They have gone out into the market. They have speculated to accumulate. And the master commends them for their efforts. Although they were given different amounts and made different profits, they are both commended in the same way. Like the workers in the vineyard they both receive the same reward. They are to be put in charge of many things and are to enter into the joy of their master. We cannot all be Captain Tom or Marcus Rashford. The size of our efforts is not really what is important. It is our faithfulness. Whether in small things or large things.

The third slave is quite different. He has a very different picture of his master. A distorted image. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden were persuaded by the serpent that they were somehow in competition with God. That he wanted to deny them things. In the same way, the slave has absorbed the idea that the master is mean and vengeful. And his actions reflect that image. He hid master’s money in the ground. Burying it as Jesus was buried by the religious authorities. The slave had taken no risks but neither had he increased what he had been given.

In response, the master lives up to the slave’s image of him. He strips the slave of his talent and gives it to another. And he has the slave thrown out into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Sometimes we get the sort of God we believe in. If our God is narrow and judgmental then that may be the God we experience. But if we can have a bigger picture of God. A more generous, open, loving God then that may be the God we encounter instead.

The talents are a bit like the mustard seed or the yeast in Jesus’ other parables. They are to be used. Shared. Multiplied. Our attitude to them reflects our attitude to God. Our picture of the kingdom. Not all of us can use our God given talents to the full at the moment. But this is not just a time of waiting. Not just a time to keep our talents buried. All of us can do something. As we prepare for Christmas, whatever that looks like, many of us can use our spending power to support local businesses and vital charities. I continue to be very thankful for the ongoing generosity of so many to the Foodbank. Cathy and I have felt very blessed by all the prayers and messages of support and the practical help that we have received while we have been ill. In this second lockdown with the colder weather and shorter days, there is such a need for that ministry of love and care which so many people exercise. God has given us so much. Entrusted us with so many talents. How can we use them, multiply them, in this extraordinary time? Amen.