

In Your Hands Are the Treasures of the Kingdom

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: November 19, 2023

Readings

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

Psalm 90 or 90:1-12

I Thessalonians 5:1-10

Matthew 25:14-30

Opening

Fellow readers will know an experience of which I speak. Not with every book one reads, not even every other book one reads; in fact, in a good reading year, at best there will be 2, maybe 3, books whose final page brings grief that such a beautiful work has ended. You know this feeling when you're not able to pick up another book right away.

When that book stirs not only your imagination, but your love for Christ, one finds in that mourning at a book's end a profound gratitude that the book exists at all. That the author summoned all her creative gifts, sacrificed and sweated over the words, and put this work into the world. What once was private has now been shared and you know your life and your soul has changed.

When I finished the last page of N.T. Wright's book *How God Became King*, I had an immediate response that had nothing to do with the subject of the book, which was an outstanding book about Jesus fulfilling the promises of Israel. Instead of pondering all the topics and ideas Wright had explained over a few hundred pages, I immediately thought, 'here is a man who knows why he was born and the work he was given to do in the Kingdom of God.' I pondered his ideas later, but first I gave thanks to God for the single-minded dedication of a gifted servant, fulfilling the work God gave him to do.

We have inherited a Church with innumerable treasures and we seldom consider that the liturgies we pray, the hymns we sing, the churches we inhabit—these did not always exist. They exist because of the fruit of obedience. They took shape, form and came into being because saints of God, gifted by the Holy Spirit, inspired by the Holy Spirit, went to work with their gifts.

Ponder for a moment life in Christ, life in the Church, had servants of God from ages past refused their God-given gifts? Can you imagine your faith without hymns such as *Amazing Grace*? But there was a time before its author, John Newton, knew Christ, a time before he penned those words that so beautifully express the greatness of the Gospel.

Can you fathom Advent without ‘Come Thou Long Expected Jesus,’ Christmas without ‘Hark the Herald Angels Sing,’ or Easter morning without ‘Christ the Lord is Risen Today?’ It’s unimaginable, yet there was a time when these hymns had no shape, they were only fragments and phrases stirring in the mind and heart of Charles Wesley. Yet Charles Wesley knew God had given him an ear for verse, that his work was to depend on the Holy Spirit and write hymns for the church.

Can Anglicans fathom liturgy without the *Book of Common Prayer*? Yet it took Thomas Cranmer and other gifted theologians to arrange the Scriptures for worship; to compose the collects that have sustained us in times of joy and times of grief.

All of these servants of Christ came to understand *themselves*—the particular gifts entrusted to them by the grace of the Holy Spirit. They came to understand the needs of the church in *their place and time*—what their work, their contribution would be for the strengthening of Christ’s Church. Most of all, they knew Christ. Not only the Christ who died, not only the Christ who is risen, but the Christ who is coming again.

Section 2

When Jesus sat down with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, the burning question within their hearts was, ‘What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’ This is the question that prompted these parables—the parable we heard last Sunday about the ten bridesmaids, and today’s parable of the talents. We’re hearing parables about judgment, which makes it feel like Advent has begun early this year. But remember that it’s Holy Week in Matthew’s Gospel.

When the parable of the talents is studied, taught, or preached, we seldom notice the timing of this story. And timing is everything. Christ knows the hour of his suffering and death draws near. He trusts the Father’s faithfulness even unto death on a cross, that he will rise again after three days. Christ is preparing to return to his Father in the ascension.

It’s an interesting detail that Christ’s ascension happens on the Mount of Olives, which is *the very same location* where the Lord tells his disciples these parables about judgement and his return.

St Matthew has also given us some clues in this Mount of Olives episode that echo earlier scenes in Jesus’ ministry. When Matthew opens this scene in Holy Week, he says early in chapter 24 that Jesus ‘sat on the Mount of Olives (and) the disciples came to him.’ Readers of Matthew’s Gospel: remember well an almost identical episode, but another gathering at the beginning, right after Jesus called his first disciples:

Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

This was the *beginning* of their apprenticeship, when the Lord Jesus delivered the Beatitudes on the Sermon on the Mount. Early in that sermon, Christ addressed his disciples saying,

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.¹

¹ *Matthew 5.14-16*

That's how their apprenticeship begins, with the announcement that they are the light of the world; that they must not bury the light that dwells within them; that their light cannot be a means of their personal glory; but that they shine their light to *give glory to the Father who is in heaven*.

That's how their apprenticeship begins and when they're gathered around the feet of Jesus on a different mountain, their apprenticeship is ending. No longer apprentices, they will be apostles. Their master is going away. All his possessions he's entrusted to them. Not in the same degree to each disciple; this is not a story where all things are equal. No, some are entrusted with a greater weight than others, 'each according to their ability.' But make no mistake, a massive amount of wealth was entrusted to each one.

Scholars differ on this amount, but a single talent could mean 20-30 years' worth of wages. Do the math for five talents. The first servant was set with assets to last at least 100 years. The third servant was still set with assets for a few decades. For those who have been or are entrepreneurs, can you fathom an investor funding your venture with this amount? Most certainly this is not the *servants'* personal wealth. This is not wealth they have acquired through the sweat of their own labor. They are trustees of a staggering endowment. So note well three things from the owner in our story:

- ❖ this owner is generous beyond reason
- ❖ he trusts these servants with all he owns, distributed in differing denominations
- ❖ his departure isn't permanent; one day he'll return to settle accounts

From the actions and the rewards of the first two servants, it is clear that they possessed the mind and the diligence of their master. It is no small detail that the first servant received his talents (v.16) and went *at once* to trade. Immediately he took action to multiply the wealth given him. His single-mindedness is his honor. He is not distracted. His master's return determines his focus, his action. We find much the same with the second servant.

Each one receives the word of blessing, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' But that was not all. A word of blessing and honor from their master was not the only reward. There was *more*. Was it expected? Was it a surprise? The story doesn't say. Either way, there was more for these servants *after* their Lord's return. 'You have been faithful over a little, I *will* set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' Five talents and two talents; 100 years and 40 years of wages, respectively, sure sounds like 'much,' to me. But with this master's wealth, we find out at his return the initial endowment in his eyes was only a little!

Did the first two servants *really* know the goodness of this master?

One thing is for sure, and herein lies both the great warning and the tragedy of this parable, the third servant receives one talent—twenty years' wages—and he freezes. He buries the treasure. He puts the gift in darkness. Remember, good reader, the Sermon on the Mount. 'People (do not) light a lamp and (then) put it under a basket.' //

And when the master comes to the third servant, a man who seemed to be timid, now becomes quite forceful. He launches into an oration that is essentially an accusation. Master, you are a severe and unfair man, and I was afraid when you put the talent in my hand. /

What is the tragedy? The loss of the investment? Is there not a greater loss? *The servant did not know his master*. All his decisions, his inaction were shaped by a false image of his master.

Seated on the Mount of Olives, having left the Temple not long prior; only one day removed when Christ had been confronted and accused by **the Pharisees**; days when Christ had replied with rebukes **against the Pharisees** that they tied up heavy burdens, hard to bear, but they themselves would not lift a finger; *who else could represent the third servant?*

Seated on the Mount of Olives, Christ not only told parables of his return and his judgment, he said to his disciples, looking across at the Temple, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

The Temple leaders buried the treasures of God—hid them in the dark. They hid the gentleness, the meekness, the goodness, and the kindness of the Lord. Their time is up. The Temple will fall.

But the Lord is building his church, entrusting the treasures of his Gospel, his worship, his sacraments, his gifts, his very Holy Spirit—all into the hands of his apostles. When the Lord ascends into heaven from this same mountain, he will depart for a time and then their time will be *now*.

Section 3

It is the question that comes to everyone who decides to be an apprentice of Jesus. One does not remain an apprentice alone; one becomes an apostle of some kind—sent in his name, with his gifts, on his mission. The Lord’s return is promised. He has put so very many treasures into our hands. What are we doing with them?

The treasures we receive are not spiritual gifts alone. Personal gifts are certainly a key meaning of this parable. But that’s far too narrow a meaning to speak of individual gifts alone. The master entrusts the *fullness* of his possessions to his servants. We have received the treasures of liturgies, prayers, psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Are these sources for our private comfort alone, or are they treasures we give away? When you memorize even a few psalms, you have holy, wise, life-giving words to offer another in time of crisis or desperation.

Isn’t a mystery how even our trials become treasured possessions from the Lord? Look at the ministry of the Apostle Paul and how the Gospel spread, how the Church received strength when Paul testified of God’s faithfulness in his trials. Tell the stories of your trials, your past failures now redeemed in Christ, to the next generation. By so doing, the treasure of trials endured with the help of God will multiply in the Kingdom.

Do not overlook the treasure that is this place, this city. This city is a treasure given to us. If you believe God calls you to another city, may you do so after practicing detachment, patient discernment, and total surrender to the Lord. But wherever he places you, treasure that place as one of God’s great possessions entrusted to your care. Whether that span of care be small, medium, or large, be faithful in the place where he has placed you.

I’m going to give the final word this morning to one of my most beloved saints, Madeleine Delbrêl, who believed the work of mission had been entrusted to ordinary people, who understood themselves to be ‘missionaries without a boat.’

We, the ordinary people of the streets, believe with all our might that this street, this world, where God has placed us, is our place of holiness. We believe that we lack nothing here that we need. If we need something

else, God would already have given it to us.²

Conclusion

As a young woman, Delbr el was an avowed atheist, even publishing an essay entitled ‘God is Dead... Long Live Death!’ She wholeheartedly believed God was absurd, until she befriended some devout Christians. Those friendships coupled with an intense intellectual search led her to a radical conversion at age 20.

After her conversion she moved to a settlement outside Paris called Ivry, known to be the capital of communism in France in the 1930s. Delbr el had moved to Ivry because there were poor people and non-believers there, unaware of the communist presence in the city. In Ivry she formed a small group, a contemplative community dedicated to the worship of Christ and service of the poor. Not only did Madeleine treasure the poor of Ivry, she treasured the Church and all its gifts, the beauty of its whole Gospel. From her relentless work on the streets of Ivry, Madeleine still embraced her gift of writing, to unite the active life of service with the life of contemplation. Madeleine had a childlike trust that the God who redeemed her is generous and kind and good. Thus she did not fear taking action. She rejoiced in obedience. I close with a few lines from her poem, *The Dance of Obedience*.

*Make us live our life
Not like a game of chess, where every move is calculated,
Not like a contest, where everything is difficult,
Not like a math problem, which makes our head hurt,
But like an endless celebration, where our meeting with you is
Constantly new,
Like a ball,
Like a dance,
In the arms of your grace,
In the universal music of love.
Lord, ask us to dance.*

Yes, Lord, help us live our life with trust, with courage, with freedom, with the joy of obedience. For we believe you will return and we long to return all our works for your glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

² *Madeleine Delbr el, We, The Ordinary People of the Streets, 54.*