

De-Toxifying God: Re-Reading the Parable of the Talents

Sermon for the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 15 November 2020

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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Zephaniah 1: 7, 12-18; Psalm 90: 1-8; 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11; Matthew 25: 14-30

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

When I was a young student working a holiday job in an insurance office, someone asked me what I was studying at Uni. When I told her 'physics', she looked puzzled and asked if that was about animals. 'No', I said—and I don't think very helpfully—'it's about matter and energy and their interaction.' So, what's the bible about, if you could sum it up in a single phrase? With today's readings in mind, I'd like to suggest that the bible is about detoxifying God.

The way it does this is by tracing the path along which God's people through history come to offload bad ideas about God as they discover more genuine, more lifegiving ones. It's a bit like the journey of faith that some of us will have made in our own lives, leaving us with a significantly transformed image

of God. That's all as it should be, and it's in tune with developmental psychology. But here's the rub: we often find that the good ideas, the mature and healthy images of God, may not take hold without our first having to struggle free of the bad ones. Whether our God used to be like Santa Claus, or like something from Sigmund Freud such as the superego or the projection of a father figure, we may well have to face the negativity of that imagery before we can come through to know God maturely and truly—God as revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, and no longer in the mirror of a troubled personal psychology.

And this is what strikes me in our apocalyptically coloured readings today, on this second-last Sunday of the Church year as Advent begins to announce its presence—readings that contain harsh images of God. But, as I say, we can often only grasp God's loving reality by unlearning, by offloading the harsh alternatives.

The lectionary today first gives us Zephaniah from the Old Testament breathing fire and judgement, while the

accompanying psalm makes threats of God's consuming anger while also imagining God as a safe refuge from one generation to another—the positive image emerging and beginning to counteract the negative one.

Then we come to Paul in our 1 Thessalonians reading this morning, where we find an explicit denial of harsh and judgmental divine imagery—though that negative imagery is still present, if only to be set aside. It's as if our imagery of God has an unavoidable default setting that we need to reset. So we see the positive image of God supplanting the negative one in today's epistle with words like these: 'But you beloved are not in darkness, for the day to surprise you as a thief'; and especially this: 'For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us'.

Here we see the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, coming to heal a tortured and shame-filled religiousness. Here we see a God of fear and disapproval patiently but firmly being put to rest.

Now all this an introduction to how I'm going to present today's familiar, perhaps too familiar, gospel parable of the talents. I've realised that to properly understand it, we need to situate it in the run of Sunday gospel readings we're having from Matthew 24 on. When we kept All Saints' Day two Sundays back we missed the normally set gospel from Matthew 24 with its apocalyptic imagery of desolating sacrileges in the temple, and Jesus declaring the coming destruction of that temple—with darkness filling the earth and the powers of heaven shaken; with false Messiahs coming with wars and rumours of wars.

Preachers don't often make much sense of such readings, do they? But let me try to do so. I suggest that they're best understood as offering us an allegory of the kind of world that's coming to an end, with the rule of human violence and judgementalism put on notice, along with the desolating sacrilege—the toxic religion that is—declared to be finished. Instead, Jesus announces a new God, a new religion, a new temple, a new humanity and all in his own person—a very different type of messiah, then, who will end rather than

perpetuate humanity's fatal fascination with wars and rumours of wars.

This is the new beginning that we have to look out for and to get on board with as we move towards Advent. To help us on this journey we have the subsequent parable of wise and foolish bridesmaids, then today's parable of the talents, and next week on the Feast of Christ the King we have Jesus' prophecy about the sheep and the goats—about where God's heart most truly inclines: toward the hungry and thirsty, the naked and sick, the strangers and prisoners.

Friends, in this run of parable and prophecy, and then finally in Matthew 26 with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to meet his passion, we run the apocalyptic gauntlet and we're invited to come out the other end with our image of God detoxified. Let me show you how I now think it's all meant to work.

In this progressive journey from Matthew 24, we're being weaned off this harsher view of God as we're shown how that harshness shapes the way we see ourselves and

experience life. Look at the two sorts of bridesmaids: the normal ones who forgot to pack the extra oil just in case and the proprietorial, big-sister types who look down on them and ensure that they miss out on the party. The message is about alertness and urgency but it's also about having the wrong impression of the bridegroom—the smug, superior, judgemental bridesmaids who get in the door think they know the bridegroom, while the poor harassed bridesmaids who end up on the outer are convinced that they don't know him. Whereas with Christ as our bridegroom we know that all the bridesmaids—and groomsmen, and best men, and worst men for that matter—are meant to be inside not outside, despite any lapses in preparedness.

In today's Gospel, with its parable of the talents, we again see how our view of the master leads either to a more joyful and positive reaction or else to a more fearful, stubborn and resentful one. The master is clearly not the most appealing character, it has to be said. His sort of aggressive venture capitalism isn't universally applauded—not in the agrarian communities of Jesus' day, where financial speculation was

totally foreign and unsavoury, and not today either, as a global pushback against laissez faire capitalism is starting to emerge. This demanding master declares at the end of today's gospel that those who have will get more and those who don't will end up with even less—essentially, that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. The third servant finds himself overwhelmed, ending up bitter and twisted towards his master.

So, the God we believe in is the God we experience. The first two servants feel secure enough with the master to throw themselves into the challenge he poses, to grow his enterprise. As for the third servant, however, he's afraid of the master and won't risk what might go wrong, so he plays it safe—he returns the uninvested talent. Perhaps he's even surly about it.

Now, some interpreters these days see this third servant as an anti-imperial resistance hero, waving his protest placard at the World Economic Forum. I'm focussing on something different: on how the third servant's view of the master

determines how he experiences the master—how his condemnation by the master is in fact simply the playing out of his prior expectations. Sadly but truly, people who think like victims often end up as victims; people who have been bullied into a poor self-image end up unlucky in life and in love. Our early programming, and the story we've come to tell about ourselves, can so readily shape our outcomes in life. And the wrong sort of religious indoctrination—being taught to think about God in monstrous and intrusive terms—is a major contributor to human unhappiness.

So, the message, I think, is that if we live with a harsh and disapproving god, then that's how we'll experience God, and hence we'll have no capacity to enter into the joy of our master, because we can't see or imagine anything joyful and positive about our religion at all. And, as you know, the world is full of angry Christians with a grievance, whose contemptuous behaviour towards others reflects the type of god they believe in—the type of god we're meant to be weaned off by the alternative messaging of word and sacrament.

Next Sunday's Gospel still shows us something of the punishing God who's in the imaginative scaffolding of the bridesmaid's parable, likewise in today's parable of the talents, though he's being edged more definitively out of the picture. It's still a harsh enough image of God, with the unrighteous goats destined for eternal punishment while the righteous sheep are headed for eternal life. But next Sunday we'll notice that it's no longer a case of the rich getting richer while the poor get poorer, because instead it's the poor and deprived, with strangers and prisoners, who are the special recipients of God's concern—the very ones who are still treated with contempt around the world, not least in first world countries like America and Australia.

So, bit by bit as we read ahead from Matthew 24 the image of God is being trimmed of its nastiness and clothed in the more familiar generosity and graciousness that we see in the compassionate face of Jesus our saviour, the truest face of God.

Finally, all the tables are turned. From Matthew 26 the apocalypse is fully sprung on us—the veil is fully lifted, that is—when the story’s climax comes in Jerusalem. All of a sudden, the harsh and repellent God is no longer to be seen. It’s not the unrighteous who undergo the full weight of righteous anger but it’s Jesus himself who dies in solidarity with all those who Frantz Fanon called the wretched of the earth. Here there’s no more righteous God of vengeance whose great achievement is the crafting of psychologically damaged, spiritually unproductive individuals.

Rather, God is revealed at last as totally alien to all that: not a harsh excluder of bridesmaids, not a terror to anxious and fearful servants, not even the punisher of those who are plainly unrighteous, but instead the one who steps in person into humanity’s nasty righteousness machine on Good Friday and, like a spanner in the works, succeeds in wrecking it. The righteous anger that condemns Jesus on Good Friday isn’t God’s anger, then, as some Christians will tell you—those who would resent what I’m trying to express today. Instead, the righteous anger is ours only; it’s only the human anger

that goes with a bad image of God—an image that Good Friday seeks to undo decisively and be rid of forever.

The new and lifegiving God, the true God, is then revealed at last on Easter Sunday as a God for us, and never against us—a God who heals whatever psychic traumas have poisoned our religious imaginations, and who sets us free to love and serve the Lord. I'm suggesting to you today that it's this illumination, this liberation, that the third servant misses out on.

The Lord be with you ...