

From fear to trust – Matthew 25:14-30

I would like to speak with Claire, Louisa, Jordan, Warren and Rachel about to be ordained and inducted as elders in Knox Church.

I would like the rest of us to eavesdrop.

I am frequently startled at the relevance of the lectionary readings.

Here is a set of readings chosen by an international ecumenical body far away and years ago, yet they are made for Knox today.

Three people are given talents to steward, five talents to one, two talents to another, a single talent to another.

The person with the single talent is afraid and anxious - afraid of being punished, of being criticised, of doing the wrong thing, of making a mistake, of losing what he has been given.

Imagine what might feed that fear – what had happened to him in the past, what had his family taught him, what were people around him saying? Perhaps he once had ten talents and lost them and they keep reminding him of that loss. Perhaps he cannot tolerate uncertainty or losing control or trusting someone else to manage it.

The fear is so powerful that it stops him from taking a risk. He buries the talent – the most risk-free option. In those days it is what people did to protect treasure from thieves.

For that he is called “wicked and lazy” and what he has buried is taken from him.

By contrast the two who risk their talents are called “good and trustworthy”.

Robert McLellan says this about the passage:

“The criterion with which God will make an accounting, then, is not the ability to attain a return on investment. It is in the ability to transform a fearful orientation into one of trust, to move from terror to faith. The world is full of those who would use fear to motivate and manipulate, but the church has an important response to a world ruled by fear: faith is more powerful, for faith originates from the true ruler of all.”

Rachel, Louisa, Claire, Jordan and Warren, I invite you as elders to lead us in turning from fear and anxiety to trust and faith.

Supremely to trust in God and in the providence of God, in the power of God's Spirit among us, in the presence of Jesus among us.

It is an anxious time for New Zealand churches.

There was a time we had five talents and now there is one.

Some churches are struggling.

Pakeha Anglo culture no longer supports religious world-views.

The relationship between Anglo Pakeha culture and the church is increasingly hard.

The faith that once established schools and universities and organisations is shut out by them.

In this context, smaller remnants hold tenaciously to what they know.

I hear stories from colleagues about how people shout and bully and lobby and factionalise and pressure decision-makers.

I hear stories of how cows become sacred and issues cannot be dispassionately considered because just to name them arouses anxiety.

The more sacred cows there are, the more stuck a church gets.

Martin Luther King Jr lamented of the church in 1960s USA.

"Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent sanction of things as they are."

The South African theologian John de Gruchy wrote this last week:

"Much of the disillusionment with the church derives from the fact that the church too often seems trapped in its own self-interests, petty squabbles and raising enough money to exist, rather than serving the world. It seems to be part of the problem rather than an agent of transformation. But apart from this, it has become the victim of secularisation and modernity, which has radically changed the way in which many people understand themselves and the world."

In such a context, mainline churches especially are having to relearn crucial skills lost when Christianity became acceptable.

That in itself feeds fear, that we are being invited to be other than we thought we were, to learn spiritual skills we aren't sure we want to practise, to imagine a God we are not sure we want.

There is a simmering fear, of making a mistake, of being judged, that people will disagree, that we aren't in control, that something might happen we don't like.

We become atheists by anxiety.

Unable to trust God to guide and redeem us, to correct and change us, to trust that God has power enough to achieve the will of God with us, if we would but "trust and obey".

Last week I was helping a congregation where one of the people said – "We always seem to be having a drama."

The more energy used clinging to what was, the less energy we have to trust in the way of God.

The gospel today is a sober message for a fearful church, that the talent we preserve will be taken.

The gospel calls us to lead and act from a place of trust, with a belief in the providence of God, in the processes of God, in the presence of Jesus.

We can consider and discuss the most sensitive issues because it is not about us.

We can be brave and risky in witnessing to the wonderful good news of Jesus Christ for our world, to the presence of God in our world.

Such trust grows from being in relationship with the God who loves and blesses, who is alive and active in the world, who is always redeeming the church and transforming it into the body of Christ.

In China, Mavis and I and others visited a church that in English was called the "No worries church".

In relation to this, I would like to say something about our personal life with God.

To decide and act from trust in the providence of God, we need to centre our day to day life in God. Somehow in our daily rhythm we need to focus our spirit on Jesus and his gospel.

Somehow through our day, some time, we need to see Jesus looking on us in love, looking from the cross in utter compassion.

Without that personal engagement with Jesus, however it happens, we become shifting sands blown by the winds of the moment, or echo chambers amplifying the noise reverberating around us, or people reacting to other's reactions, or people feeding anxiety, .

As audacious as it sounds, our call as elders is to discern the will of God for our congregation, and to lead the congregation in performing that will.

So we need to find a way to keep praying and reading the Bible so God continues to speak to us with fresh news.

As a Reformed church, we believe we need to keep in step with the moving God, because the church is always in need of reforming, of being changed by God.

That means keeping up with God in our personal and community lives, the God who keeps calling us from the future.

Keeping up with God in prayer and reading the Bible.

Our personal spiritual life is core to our leadership.

The promise is that in the process we enter into the joy of your Master.

An enduring and unquenchable joy.

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