

## 2nd Before Advent 2020

## Matthew 25.14-30

A few years ago, Bruce Springsteen recorded a version of a song that was popular in the 1950s and 60s, particularly in the civil rights protests. It was called 'Eyes On The Prize.'

It's a gospel song that rehearses the miraculous release from prison of Paul and Silas.

And so, it's a freedom song and 'keep your eyes on the prize' was all about the goal of racial justice.

The word prize only appears a handful of times in the Bible. On one of those occasions, in Philippians 3, St Paul says "I press on towards the goal, for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

The prize, as Paul has already said a few verses before, is the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord: the one who has shown us what God's dream for humankind looks like.

And this, in Matthew's language, is the kingdom: that experience of being found by God and seeing the world through God's imagination; a world that is healed.

As the writer, Fred Buechner put it, the kingdom is home, and whether we realise it or not, I think that we are, all of us, homesick for it.

Keep your eyes on the prize. Seek first the kingdom of God. And the stories in Matthew 25, which was where our Gospel reading came from today, are all about the kingdom. That is referenced in the first verse of the chapter and the 'It' at the beginning of our reading today, in verse 14, 'it is as if', the 'it' refers back to the kingdom.

In the first few verses of chapter 25 we are encouraged to be ready and constantly watchful for the one who comes surprisingly, who might even now be present to us. Then we get the Parable of the Talents. And let me offer two very different readings on this story.

The story is about an exceedingly wealthy man who asks three others to steward his wealth whilst he is away. It is, we are told, 'for a long time' that he is away, and Jesus is clearly trying to manage the expectations of his followers, that the fulness of the kingdom will not come immediately. In the meantime, there's going to be some difficult times.

Two of the stewards make loads of money and the other one goes and buries it and makes nothing. I gather that, at the time, that was an acceptable practice. So, taking it at face value, the story is about success and failure in the world's eyes.

Those who are financially successful (often in Palestine, 2000 years ago, that was because they were in league with Roman power) and those, on the other hand, who are jettisoned because they don't play the wealth game.

This is the world that you're in, Jesus says, but then he tells another story with another set of criteria for judging human success: God's criteria.

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for, for I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me. Here is true wealth.

So, one reading of this story, is that it's about how God measures the successful life, with a different kind of wealth. The kind of wealth that is born of kindness and compassion.

A second way of interpreting this story, is that this text relates back to the religious context that Jesus inhabits. And in Matthew 23 he has spent the whole chapter lambasting the religious leadership of the day, for a whole string of spiritually deadening practices.

God has given his people all kinds of blessing this story tells us. (The monetary value of one talent was 15 years wages at the time, so we're talking unimaginable wealth of this man with money) and what have they done with this blessing – well, they buried it! Others have taken it on board and the blessed are giving the blessing some 30, some 60, some 100-fold.

In the case of the third man who buries the talent, we see that he is afraid of his master, even though the master has been incredibly generous towards him. He fears the outcome, so he does nothing. This is not stewardship; this is sterility.

As someone said: a ship is safe in the harbour, but it is not what a ship is for.

We have not been given the gospel to sit on it, but to take risks to offer it; to share it; to give it away. And as we do this, so the fruitfulness of the kingdom is released.

So, is our faith more about safety, and reassurance, and security, or is it about risk-taking, and openness, and courage, and the unimaginable abundance to which those virtues lead?

These days are full of huge distraction. It comes at us from every which way.

What really matters?

Keep your eyes on the prize. Amen.