

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL
2ND SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY 2011
CATHEDRAL EUCHARST

The Parable of the Talents provides ideal fare for a certain kind of Sermon. By that I mean that it is easy to understand, and it has a clear message that transcends the time and circumstances of its telling.

The attention of the hearer is directed to the useless slave who buried his talent. He buried it in order to give it back to the Master, just as it was. In other words, he played safe in contrast to his more adventurous colleagues.

Jesus surely had in mind, and so would his hearers, the Scribes and Pharisees, whose whole way of life and religious system was to keep every jot and tittle of the Law exactly as it was: specifically, to 'build a fence around the Law'.

Jesus had in mind something altogether more adventurous: the employment of talents – be they slight or considerable – in the service of the kingdom of God, no matter how great the risks. More than that, Jesus seems to have been declaring a self-evident truth – true because it relates to basic human experience – that if a person possesses a talent and uses it, they will be able to do more with it, whereas if they squander it and fail to

use it, they will lose it. I speak from experience as one who was recently rash enough to play the piano in public, for a very good cause, with scant time for practice. Whatever may be the nature of the talent, the more we work at it, the more we will be able to achieve – and vice-versa.

Those are valuable lessons, and this particular parable is, at least on the surface, among the most directly applicable of all that Jesus told. The joy of the Master, as well as that of the one who serves him, comes from a way of life that is based on grace, courage and concern for others – not on formal religion, fear and self-protection.

There might end the sermon: and (which is an unusual and happy feature of ministry in this Cathedral) some would say ‘Thank you, Dean. That was really helpful: I’ll go away and think about it.’ Well, I hope you will...

But – by accident rather than design – Jesus’ teaching comes to us, not just on the second Sunday before Advent, but on Remembrance Sunday, and no preacher ought to neglect the theme of remembrance or fail to seek to relate it to Jesus’ parable about the costly demands of Christian discipleship.

In truth, this is less problematic than it might appear, because remembrance ought not to be a passive, purely individual matter. Just as

Jesus' teaching demands careful thought and positive action, so remembrance, creatively used, can issue in practical actions, based on grace, courage and concern for others.

But if this is to be so, we must dare to think critically about the process and understand that remembrance – especially corporate, national remembrance, is not entirely straightforward. It *conceals* the past as much as it *remembers* it. Remembrance, for very understandable reasons, can be biased by the need to make past actions seem necessary and justifiable: to make sense of events which, in hindsight, may now look very different. The Battle of the Somme is one such; and the obliteration bombing of Hamburg at the end of World War 2 with the loss of 44,000 civilian lives in one night, which caused such anguish to Bishop Bell, is another. Our remembrance cannot and should not be a matter of unthinking pride, but of deep reflection, with a large element of sorrow and penitence.

The Jewish rite of Passover, to which this service of the Eucharist is so closely related, recalls the liberation of God's people from slavery in Egypt; that is a matter of remembrance, and both our liturgies have a vital component of remembering. In the Passover ritual, wine is spilt to remind the participants that liberation came at a price:

‘We have poured a bit of our glasses, since we cannot be completely joyful, our cups cannot be completely full, when the Egyptians, God’s creatures like ourselves, had to suffer.’

Just so. The price of the exodus and the price of our redemption is paid in blood, and that must be a source of profound soul-searching and deep sorrow.

And so on this Sunday in the Church’s Calendar, and on this day in our national life, we must certainly remember. We must give thanks for peace, freedom and opportunity – the opportunity that is ours, to build a more just, a better society for the benefit of future generations.

It is entirely right that we should remember those who fought and died – and who lay their lives on the line this very day – in what is perceived as the cause of freedom.

But we must always remember, first and foremost, that there is *another* kingdom. The kingdom for whose coming we pray every day of our lives: a kingdom which demands the employment of all the talents we have received and which requires, in the words of St Paul, that we:

‘put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us, not for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with Him.’

I should like to try to translate that wonderful piece of theological writing into a down-to-earth prayer for us to use on this day; so, just as we are, let us pray:

O God of truth and justice
we hold before you those whose memory we cherish
and those whose names we shall never know.
Help us to lift our eyes above the torment of this broken world,
and grant us the grace to pray for those who wish us harm.
As we honour the past, may we put our faith in your future;
for you are the source of life and hope
now and forever. Amen.
