

**SERMON FOR 2ND SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT: 19 NOVEMBER 2017 AT
STAPLEFORD
(based on Matt.25:14-30 Parable of the Talents and Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18)**

No reward for apathy or complacency

We are in Kingdom season, and we have two perspectives on what kingdom is or means in our readings from Zephaniah and Matthew. The prophet is looking ahead, to the coming of God's Kingdom, at which stage those who have led their lives resting “complacently on their dregs” can expect some pretty serious divine retribution. But is the Kingdom merely a future concept, aimed at giving us hope? Zephaniah’s message of doom and gloom suggests that we will get what we deserve on the day of judgement. But perhaps, if we make the right choices, it may be possible to live in a way that prepares us, that makes the here and now a better place.

The Gospel reading, too, tackles both complacency, seen in the inaction of the third slave, and judgement, in the reaction of the master. Just as Zephaniah warns of how the way we live will affect the nature of the final judgement, Christ, too, reminds us of the need to live now in total commitment to God as we wait. Those slaves in the parable were given money, to invest or use in a way that would increase its value. If we take those monetary talents to be a metaphor for our God-given skills, then we note that they are not given in order to make the recipient of the talents richer, but the one who bestowed them. If the master represents God, then the success or otherwise of productive use of those talents benefits our relationship with God. Lack of effort to use them to good effect results in a severance of that relationship. And maybe one way of illustrating that interpretation of the parable is to bring it up to date by retelling it in a modern context. The story I am about to tell happens to be a situation that I, and probably many others, have known in our working lives – but I hasten to assure you that the characters in this tale are entirely figments of my imagination.

Think of a group of workers in an office – it could be in local government, the civil service or some huge corporation. This group has a head, affectionately known as Boots (the word Bossy merely implied), and three colleagues. They are Ms Deirdre Ponsonby-Smythe – a young, eager type, working all hours and up for a challenge; Mr Reginald Brown – a middle-aged gentleman and a safe pair of hands, who has possibly seen the last of his promotion chances, but who plods on determinedly; and then there is Fred Bloggs – only 6 years, two months and three days off retirement, not that he’s counting. He has been with the organisation boy and man, but has never really seen the point of making too much of an effort. He mutters sometimes about Boots’ management style, but ensures he never puts a foot wrong as he gets away with doing the minimum.... and anyway, the other two seem happy enough to do the necessary towards achieving the organisation's targets.

Then one day, the CEO announces the need to make job cuts, delegating that role to his group heads, in this case to Boots. Fred, who has an unblemished record and believes he is undismissable, assumes it will be a case of last in first out, which would mean Deidre being given the push. And she has taken a few risks in the past, sailed close to the wind as it were. Boots interviews all three, one by one, asking them to give an account of why they think they should be kept on. Deirdre has won a number of high profile contracts for the company, working long hours; Reginald has spent time and effort ensuring that the i's and t's are dotted and crossed to minimise risk; and Fred, well, he’s never taken sick leave and has been present in the office from 9:00 till 5:00 each day. Guess who is handed his P45. Fred remonstrates with his boss, saying he has always been treated differently and was never trusted with any high profile work. But he is told that his lack of team-spirit and his complacent attitude mean he did not deserve to be trusted with more important work. So, his somewhat unremarkable past record had not earned him a place in the new slimmed-down and efficient organisation of the future. Boots, by nickname and by nature, kicks him off the team and “into the outer darkness”.

There is plenty of judgement in that story. I can almost hear Fred saying: "What have I done wrong to deserve this?". But, just like the third slave in Jesus' parable, it's not what he has done so much as what he has not done. He has wasted opportunities and invested little commitment or loyalty in those who employ him. I don't usually like to focus on the judgemental aspects of God, preferring to think of him as loving and forgiving. Yet at the same time, I am acutely aware of the need to be worthy of that love and forgiveness. And, although I believe that God loves all his creation, it doesn't feel right to just assume that, because I turn up at church and love God, I deserve to be loved in return. We in the West live in relative comfort - I think that can lead to taking things for granted. Complacency is doing nothing when so much of the rest of the world is striving to use their talents to make society a better place. What about our commitment to the world God created? If we are content to let others do the hard work, and to get by on doing as little as possible to help, be it in our communities or on the other side of the world, what does that say about our loyalty to our boss, the creator of us all?

I do feel sorry for Fred, though. He wasn't a bad bloke, just not willing to try, to use whatever talents he had to the benefit of the organisation that paid his wages. He didn't need to be ambitious, or a risk-taker – he just needed to care, to be a team player. So perhaps the message we can take away today is that living without making the most of what God has given us is simply not enough.

In the name of Christ, amen.