



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, November 16, 2008

The Twenty-seventh Sunday after Pentecost

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

+

A Sermon by
The Reverend Robert H. Stafford
on
Matthew 25:14-15, 19-29

+

*A SERMON FOR THE TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY
AFTER PENTECOST*

This morning's Gospel is, I think, very difficult to interpret. So, let me begin by asking some, but not all of you, to remember back to the 1950's; more specifically, to the golden age of television.

Recall, the popular series, *The Millionaire*?

Each episode had the same format. Mr. John Beresford Tipton, an anonymous and eccentric philanthropist, would gift someone with a check for \$1,000,000, a considerable sum now but even more substantial fifty years ago; the dramatic action being the effect the unexpected windfall created in the recipient's life.

At first read, today's Gospel appears to be somewhat like *The Millionaire*. It's about three men being given money: We watch what happens.

Speaking of money, I was, recently asked by a gentleman at a supper table we were sharing if I "...were in the Market or, was I a religious man?" I didn't answer right away, but I thought to myself, "Merciful heaven, I didn't know these were contradictory terms." Nonetheless, I replied, "Yes, I am."

Money is in my pocket. It's in yours. And, let's not forget it's even in the collection plate and endowment of this parish. It cuts across the boundaries of what is secular and what is sacred. We all have some experience with it. And, we all have something to say about it; especially in this particular time, which is troubling to all but a few.

Money is also another word for power. Those who have money have power, and, those without it have little power. It is, therefore, also a metaphor for life in the kingdom of this world; a world fueled by a hunger for this most precious and addictive substance, for which men and nations are willing to risk everything.

I said, moments ago, that today's Gospel is about money; more especially about investing it. It would, I think, be an easy temptation for any preacher to begin to interpret today's parable

by placing God in the role of the master; a position similar to that of Mr. John Beresford Tipton; someone, whom we'd term, being of "high net worth."

But, I want to exercise a note of caution. To yield to this temptation is like standing on sand; there isn't a firm foothold on which to support an allegorical hypothesis of that sort.

The tension in today's parable is between risk and safety. Three servants are each given a specific sum of money. Two double what they receive and are praised for being shrewd investors; while the third is severely rebuked for his lack of profit, having sought safety in buried treasure, because, we are told, he "...was afraid..." (25) of his master.

The master, we cannot help but note, is not particularly beneficent and is cast in an unflattering light (24); an idle landlord; "...a hard man.." (24), he lives off the efforts of his slaves to satisfy and to please him. Furthermore, he's what we would term a "wheeler-dealer" when it comes to right and wrong. Walking both sides of the financial street, he seeks only what would always be in his best monetary interest and gain. He'd be glad, in other words, to sell any of us the Brooklyn Bridge! We could therefore summarize his character saying he is a greedy profiteer.

This portrait would make him a poor example of morality in an allegory in which he would also be representative of God; unlike, for example, the father in the *Prodigal Son*, who is an exemplar of mercy and forgiveness; a man whose charity, in other words, is emblematic of God's compassion and boundless goodness.

So, I would caution that today's Gospel, very odd material indeed, is, therefore, not meant to be heard or read as an allegory.

What, then, is it?

The clue to answering that question is found, I think, in the pivotal verse 29: "...Unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but unto him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." In other words, and, roughly paraphrased, it's an ancient way of saying what we mean in the adage "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer"; or, something akin to "where there's an imagination and a will, there's a way to riches."

This philosophy is also a wobbly foundation on which to build a theological understanding of the Almighty. It would, for example, be better suited to Scarlet O'Hara rebuilding her beloved Tara!

The disparagement voiced in the verse, I believe, instead hides the judgment of the parable; a dark commentary on the ordering of human society and our understanding in the kingdom of this world of money as ultimate power and priority.

I have money, therefore, I am: I have power, therefore, I am; are two different ways of decoding the foundation on which the parable rests. Those who have money/power get respect and reward: those without it do not; a discrepancy, thereby, making for a lopsided, topsy-turvy, polarized world of advantage and disadvantage, have and have-not; a world where difference is seemingly irreconcilable.

We, ourselves, know this world very well; particularly, in the people, places, things, and events of daily life marked so often by chronic self-interest and entitlement, rich or poor; a me-ism that makes for restless habitation in a world where happiness/security is

always in having one dollar more than one already has; or, envying those who do; or profiting on the backs of those who have-not.

The English Dominican, theologian and author, Timothy Radcliffe, notes this when he says, “Money has become the point of everything, the ultimate human striving, the universal symbol, whose demands are absolute; the final reference point” (p. 155, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?*).

So, today’s parable, in my estimation, describes an amoral world; a world often upside-down and where the outside doesn’t always measure what is inside; a world where wrong-doing goes unpunished, overlooked, excused, covered-over, or worse, is sometimes rewarded. It is therefore not surprising that a world such as this can and does go bankrupt!

“...In this mortal life” [says theologian Karl Rahner], “...we are on pilgrimage far from the Lord” (p. 111, *A Rahner Reader*, Crossroads). So, in Rahner’s words, today’s parable also reminds us that we live in a world that is in peril of being lost in a sincere delusion far from what God intends us to pursue.

Like Matthew, I am not here to say, “Gee, ain’t this awful? Money/power is the root of all evil.” That lament is really not the point that the author of the Gospel is today constructing.

I say this, because what immediately follows this parable in the Evangelist’s text is a descriptive and poetic account of the Last Judgment (25.31-46). This subsequent material, which will be the appointed Gospel for next Sunday, I strongly suspect, makes what we have before us today, therefore, something more than an isolated commentary meant to stand alone about conditions and life in the kingdom of this world.

Instead, and brilliantly so, this parable is, I think, a preface to a greater theological statement and understanding; one that the lectionary, or religious calendar, will use to conclude the Church year. In that sense, it is a prelude to the drama of the Last Judgment; the final revelation and coming of the kingdom of heaven; an event which subverts and overturns the kingdom of this world; and, an event which is also the concluding leg of our pilgrimage with the Lord.

This apocalyptic or end time of God’s final judgment is understood by the Church as being an everlasting *eighth day*; the time when God will complete the work of creation. Therefore, it paradoxically, is a new, first day; one marked by the coming of the Christ who brings the final victory over evil and suffering; the consummation of history resulting in the eternal reign of Almighty God. Already here, but not yet fully revealed, this end time is the Christian hope and promised future. It is not to be feared but to be received as Good News.

This long awaited eighth day of re-beginning is no longer a time of pernicious self-interest; the cloud, for example, St. Catherine so aptly describes characterizing human selfishness and willfulness. The kingdom of heaven is, instead, to be a time of perfect charity; what St. Paul alludes to in his *First Letter to the Corinthians* when he says, “Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth” (10.24); a rather radical socialistic perspective, I would add.

Today’s parable of a fallen world is therefore a sharp contrast to what is now here and coming amongst us; that being, the kingdom of heaven.

Have you seen *Billy Elliot*, the movie or the musical about the young, working-class English boy whose great desire/passion is simply to dance, a passion which made him all but a stranger in his own family and community, who had no experience with such a child?

Remember what he replied when he was asked, “What do you feel when you dance?”

“Electricity” he said.

This *electricity*, as Billy termed it, made him alive; set him apart from a society that was in many ways lifeless/limited and which held him captive. This power or electricity made him who he truly was, because to dance was to participate in his destiny.

I bring the example of Billy Elliot to mind because the kingdom of heaven, God’s judgment of mercy, forgiveness, and peace; the charity or good news of the eighth day now here, should be our chief desire, just as dancing was the singular passion and work of young Billy; a priority and destiny that frees us to become our truest and fullest selves; a living testimony of the power of God’s Spirit to re-create and to do in and through us what we cannot accomplish on our own.

That transformative/transfiguring power, that electricity, if you will, the Gospel wants us to understand, is our absolute and final reference point. And, it is a power that is here with us now, in an end time of re-creation. It is nothing other than the kingdom of heaven. And, it suffers great violence from the kingdom of this world; like that perpetrated by the Master in today’s Gospel, whose sole ambition was to accumulate wealth and power at all cost. Yet, this kingdom that is both, and, at once, our end and our re-beginning unto eternal life, remains none the less, undiminished in its promise and power to transform the most unlikely people, places, things, and events; just as our Lord at supper, for example, the night before he was to die, changed bread and wine into something greater.

The nature and purpose of the kingdom of heaven are indistinguishable from him who brings it; the Lord who is also divine love made flesh; the Spirit whose dwelling place is the human heart; the God whose Church, described in the words of theologian Hans Kung, must be “...a minority serving a majority” (p. 487, *The Church*, Sheed & Ward).

Despite what we see happening around us, we are today in the midst of an advent of a new age in which all people shall ultimately come or be brought to possess everything equally, and we shall see in the face of one another the face of Christ himself!

This new time asks of us everything. It promises to make of us and this world who and what we are not, because it is also our bright future with our Lord and Deliverer, the God in whom there is no fear, no violence, no death – the God whose power, whose electricity, whose transforming gift is Love, the ultimate purpose of creation.