

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 19, 2023

The Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

1 Chronicles 29:1-14; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15; Matthew 25:14-30

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Annual Appeal 2024

In our Strategic Plan of 2019, we shared a vision:

To become more Christ-like in everything that we do, making a difference to midtown Manhattan by being a vibrant community of faith where all can feel at home. Our beautiful building and musical tradition help us to reach out as a beacon of hope.

If you attended the Annual Meeting, or have watched it on-line, you will have heard how, in spite of the pandemic, our mission is strong and collegial; and the very last words of our vision statement are the theme for this mass today: *“To do this, we need to ensure that our mission is strong, resolute, ordered, and appropriately resourced.”*

What do the scripture readings tell us about resourcing the church in its mission? Let us start with the Epistle reading. The New Testament Church had no official buildings; it was a Church ‘on the move’ and very much focused in peoples’ homes. It was over 300 years before the church had basilicas. Does this mean they had no need for financial support? On the contrary; in the Acts of the Apostles, we read that the early followers of Jesus shared everything in common in order to help those less fortunate – especially the widows and the orphans and the poor and the hungry. ¹ But they also sent funds to other churches in need. If you like, it was the origins of the parish assessment that we give to the Diocese. Paul regularly shared the needs of particular Churches and people many hundred of miles away sent resources to help. The ministry of the apostles and the early deacons of the Church was also supported financially by Church members who gave generously according to their means. Notice what Paul says to the Corinthian Church, *“You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity.”* It seems counter-intuitive, but from the earliest days of the Church, giving away money was a means of being enriched! Being generous to the mission of the Church was seen as a liberating experience, rooted in thankfulness to God for his generosity. Resourcing the mission and ministry of the Church is, therefore, biblical.

In the Old Testament Lesson, we heard of King David making resources available so that his son, Solomon would be able to build the first Temple. In what is probably the most successful Annual Appeal ever, King David asks the leaders of the ancestral houses to give generously and willingly. He called it a “free-will” offering. Not a tax or a demand, but a gift to God. And what a gift it was! The list of tens of thousands of talents translates into billions of dollars by today’s standards; the walls of the Temple were covered with gold inside. David ensured that not only the Temple would be built, but that there would be enough endowment in the treasury for its upkeep and for the provision of the ministers. Did he pat himself on the back at being such a successful fund raiser? Listen to how he ended his prayer: *“But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to make this freewill offering? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you.”*

That, my friends, is why I need you to respond to our own Annual Appeal. To make, as it were, your own free-will offering. St. Paul says to you and to me, *“Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”* Giving to our Annual Appeal is exactly in the same spirit of those examples we heard in scripture today; recognizing like King David that **“All things come from you, and of your own have we given you.”**

So, that takes us to the Gospel today and the Parable of the Talents. We tend to think of the word talent as having something to do with being good at something and, it is true, the word has come to mean that, but it meant something very different before the Middle Ages. In ancient times, a talent was a unit of measurement based on the Greco-Roman silver drachma. There were 100 drachmas to a mina and 60 minas to a talent. It is generally thought that a drachma weighed 66g. Therefore, one talent would be the equivalent of 873 pounds in weight of silver! So, the slave who was given five talents, and the one who was given ten had a ridiculous amount given them. Jesus is, of course, deliberately using astronomical wealth here to make a point. But if you think this parable is about venture capital, hedge funds, or speculating on the currency markets, I am afraid you will be sorely disappointed. This parable comes towards the end of the whole section of Matthew’s Gospel concerning the end of time – the second coming of Christ. This is an apocalyptic parable and the whole of chapters 24 and 25 in Matthew’s Gospel are apocalyptic in theme with parables such as the wise and foolish bridesmaids and the separation of the sheep and the goats.

The central character of the parable is not the ruthless master, or the shrewd, hard-working slaves but, rather, the slave who buried his talent. Why did he bury his treasure? He tells us; because he was afraid. The parable is an encouragement to the followers of Jesus not to be afraid of the master’s return but, on the contrary, to be ready – to be active – to be responsible stewards. It is about actively playing your part while the master is away. Doing nothing is not an option! No one knows the day or the hour for the Second Coming and, therefore, there is no time to waste in working for the Kingdom of God.

My friends, I appeal to you to make your free-will offering – to pledge to our annual appeal and not to bury whatever your talent is, remembering that all things come from God, and we are simply giving that back what he so generously has given to us in the hope that, when he returns in glory, Jesus will say “Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your master.”

1. See Acts 2:43-47