

## **Sermon for Sunday 18 October 2020 – How to invest your life**

### **(Stewardship 3)**

Readings: Isaiah 43: 1-7 and Matthew 25: 14-30

Hello, it's good to join you for Harvest Festival today. Harvest is one of my favourite times of the year as it's an opportunity to thank God for his goodness to us and to celebrate the beautiful fruits of the earth grown by our parishioners and the wonderful flower arrangements constructed by our flower arranging teams in our churches. Do please take an opportunity to visit our churches in Harwell and Chilton and enjoy the sights and scents of these arrangements and reflect on the generous God we love and serve.

I'm not actually very good at growing fruit and vegetables although I do try to grow herbs. I enjoy much more seeing other people's gardens and allotments especially if their owners are more green-fingered than me! Occasionally I go into Oxford on the bus and I really like looking over the allotments in the Abingdon Road seeing what local people are growing there.

I think that one of my failings as a gardener is that I put away seeds or corms and forget all about them until they are several years out of date. When I find them again I try to plant them – after all they won't grow in the packet – and usually something sprouts after a few days or weeks but it would probably have been better if I'd planted them years earlier and tended them much better!

In order to make the most of our gardening opportunities we really need to plant seeds or corms at the right time, tend the plants well with water and feed, tie them to supports if necessary, and keep them sheltered from the creatures that might try to eat them before we can.

In this morning's reading from Matthew's gospel, we hear of three servants being given something by their master and being expected to make the most of what they were given. In this case they were not given seeds or corms, but bags of gold. The first servant was given five bags of gold which he put to work and doubled them in value. The second, this time given two bags of gold, doubled his investment too. But the third servant did nothing so creative with his one bag but buried it in the ground. Sounds a bit strange, but apparently in ancient times it was common practice to bury precious things to keep them safe even if they didn't appreciate in value, so long as you recorded where you'd buried them! Needless to say the one bag of gold was still only one bag of gold when it was dug up.

When the master returned after a long journey he called the three servants to him to see the results of their labours. Naturally he was delighted with the first two servants who had doubled the amount they had been given and he praised them and gave them more responsibility. But he was angry with the third servant who had merely buried his bag of gold and returned to his master only what he had been given. In his anger with the third servant he took the gold away from him and gave it to the first servant. He threw out the third servant and banished him from his presence.

The story of the bags of gold is a parable, a story with a meaning, and it's about judgement and the return of the Messiah to reign on earth. Like many of Jesus' parables he uses exaggerated language to make his point and, if we follow the parable through and see that the master represents Jesus on his return, then it's really difficult to think of him as being such a harsh judge who threw the third servant into outer darkness. But as I say, it's exaggerated language and Jesus' main point is that we, like the servants in the story, are called to be faithful in our use of the gifts God has given us and to invest our lives in the best way we can.

You'll note that the servants in the story were given different sums of money, representing the way in which God gives us gifts and responsibilities in accordance with what we can take on. He doesn't expect us to be all the same but to make the best use of what he gives us.

The first two servants made the most of all that they'd been given but the third servant did nothing with his bag of gold; he didn't even put it on deposit with the bank.

God calls us now to follow him and serve him. He calls us to invest our lives in him and to make the best use of all he gives us whether it's our time, talents or our money. We are not called to look at what others have been given (such as the five bag-of-gold-servant and the two bag-of-gold-servant), but to be faithful in making the most of that which each of us has been given. We are called not to be like the third servant who was lazy and fearful.

When we answer God's call on our lives we need to exercise our faith muscles. These muscles are like any of the muscles in our bodies which, when they are not used and exercised, will waste away and not work properly. Similarly, if we do not put our trust in the Lord and serve as he calls us, then our faith muscles will never develop and grow.

In the same way, if we are too fearful, then we won't develop in our faith as we will always be looking back or hiding away from what God has called us to do. I'm not advocating that we should be reckless, but sometimes we need to step outside our comfort zones and allow God to work through us in the power of the Holy Spirit. I am naturally quite a reserved person who doesn't take great risks so, back in 2004 I was rather guarded when I sensed that God was calling me to start a new work in Chilton School to reach the children who didn't come to church.

Over months I sensed God's call on my life but I made lots of excuses. I worked full time on the Harwell Site, I didn't have any recent contact with Chilton School, and I was unsure how to move forward with this new project.

One Sunday we hosted a visiting preacher, a dear servant of God who is now with him in heaven, a minister from Wallingford called Jim Spence. I can't remember the rest of his sermon but I clearly recall him saying 'whatever God is calling you to do – do it!'. God's message was clear and I decided I must take the project forward. With the support of our church leadership and a welcome from the staff at Chilton School, a new after-school club called Y-Club was formed. We have been able to share Jesus' love with these children and their families ever since the Club started 15 years ago and it opened up more opportunities to go into the School.

That's just one example and I'm sure you could share other encouraging stories from your own lives as well.

Is there something which God is calling you to do to which you've reacted with fear? If he is calling you to serve him then he will equip you with the gifts and support you need.

Remember those words from Isaiah chapter 43 which we heard earlier: 'do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine'. Don't leave the seeds in the packets of your lives, but release them to grow and flourish under God's direction so that they result in a great harvest for the Kingdom of God.

Blessings on your Harvest Festival!

Pam Rolls

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