

Harvest Thanksgiving (lections for 2 before Advent)
St Thomas, Salisbury, 2023

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18
Matthew 25:14-30

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

If you have ever been down to Weymouth, or Wareham, or any of those lovely places on the south coast of the diocese of Salisbury, you have probably seen boats sitting on the mud when the tide is out. When the tide is in they bobble beautifully on the water, but when the tide goes out they sit helplessly on the exposed seabed, and if they are the type of boat that has a bit of a keel, they flop sideways. Do you know what I mean? They lie all crooked.

In this morning's first reading we have exactly that image given to us by the prophet Zephaniah, to describe the indolence, the failure of the people of Jerusalem to be active, to be engaged in their faith. In the translation we heard this morning it's not so obvious: we heard "at that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs." Which sounds rather more like someone drunk in a pub or something like that. But in one of the older translations we get: "I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will visit upon the men settled on their lees." The lee side of the boat is the side which is away from the wind, and therefore the side that a boat would come to rest on, flopped over on its side, when the tide goes out. We're given this image of stuckness, of wonkiness, and a lack of action. The tide has gone out on their faith, and they just flop over.

Those of you rocking up this morning to celebrate Harvest Thanksgiving might be slightly surprised by the choice of readings this morning. And you'd be right to be, because this is a set of readings that is more often read in the second half of November, just before the end of the Christian year. But there are hard connections here with Harvest, because the readings are about growth. Not growth of the crops, though there are lines in both readings this morning that allude to the agricultural world, but the growth of believers. The growth of you and me. And how we grow seems to be particularly important, when we think about the direction in which the world is heading, which is of course towards the Kingdom. And the word that we use to describe thinking about the world moving towards its ultimate end is eschatology. Our readings this morning are about eschatology, and Scripture consistently uses the image of the harvest when it thinks about what might happen at the end.

Those of you who were in church on Advent Sunday, the very beginning of this Christian year, might just be able to dredge from the back of your minds that I preached about the parable of the sheep and the goats on Advent Sunday, and I pointed out that the very *last* set of readings that we will hear in the cycle this year is the story that is depicted in the Doom painting: of the angels coming out with their scythes to gather in the harvest, and to separate it into two piles. It couldn't matter less if you can't remember that sermon, but I just point out that we are getting very near to that reading now. And actually today's gospel reading is the passage that immediately precedes that story of the sheep and goats. Matthew chapter 25 is all about being ready. It is all about growth and productivity. It is all about action. Exactly the opposite of being tipped over on our lees with the tide ebbing away.

Immediately before the gospel reading we heard today is the parable of the 10 bridesmaids, or the 10 virgins, with their lamps. You remember? Five of them remember to top up with oil, and five of them were presumably flopping about on their lees and didn't bother going to the shop. And then the passage that immediately follows today's gospel reading is the sheep and goats, which is all about seeing people properly, seeing with the eyes of faith, seeing Christ, and doing something.

And sandwiched in between is today's gospel. The parable of the talents. What do we do with that which is entrusted to us? That's the point. And there's one of the hard connections with harvest. Everything we have is given in trust. We own none of it. "All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above." Your money, your home, your friends, your church, even your cat. These things are given into our hands, and God trusts us not to drop them. Indeed God trusts us to care for and to nurture them, to be active and enquiring and creative, rather than flop over on our lees. And that sort of behaviour is 'very God' isn't it, because on Christmas Day God gives himself into Mary's arms, and trust her, trusts us, trusts creation, not to drop him.

One really important line amongst a lot of important lines in today's gospel reading we find right at the beginning: "to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability." Each according to his ability. The parable of the talents is not describing an unfair master punishing a less skilled or talented servant for doing less well. That would be a pretty odd way of treating your creation, wouldn't it? That line is vital: the gifts that God gives us are given to us 'according to our ability'. In other words, God knows us. God knows *you*, and God gives you the gifts that are just right for *you*. To invoke the appeal to Christmas again, God

takes a certain care in choosing which Christmas presents to give. He doesn't just buy everyone a train set.

That's the key to the parable. We are given the specific set of gifts and talents that will allow us to flourish, to grow, to be fruitful, to produce a harvest. And your harvest will look different to mine. But it will be exactly the harvest that is right for you. And we therefore sell out that gift if we dig a hole and stick the talent underground. That's the moment of failure. That is the moment where we say in our heart, 'yeah, I know I was made to go sailing, but I think I'll just stay here on the mud.'

And our harvest fails. And we have forgotten to go and buy oil, and we have failed to notice the Christ in the people around us in need.

And if we want to draw hard connections between the spiritual harvest and the physical harvest of the land and the sea, well then we might notice that the earth has quite enough bounty and capacity to feed all 8.1 billion people who live in this world, and quite enough scientific genius to even out the inequalities, and to ship provisions around the globe 24 hours a day, and yet people still starve every day. And that is in large part because, at the level of governments, nations and multinational corporations we make the decision to bury our talent, flop over on our lee, and close our ears and eyes to the cries of our brothers and sisters.

And I think part of the nurturing of our own personal talents therefore has to be identifying the moments, tiny though they might be, in our own lives when we tend in that direction. When we close our eyes and ears against unhappiness or suffering because it's inconvenient, or unpleasant or discomforting. And then when we have opened our eyes and ears again, advocating

for an equitable sharing of the world's resources. And trying to model that in the way that we live.

“To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, each according to his ability.”

On this Harvest Sunday, we might commit ourselves, over the coming week, in prayer, with the Scriptures, and in careful attention to the community around us, to a stock-take of those abilities, and why God might have given us the *particular* talents that we have received. And then make sure that we have noticed that the tide is coming in, our lees are rising from the mud, and it's time to sail.

Amen.