Sunday 15 November – Second Sunday before Advent

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at Sermons (tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

A few weeks ago we all put our clocks back an hour as British Summer Time came to an end. I find that in the weeks immediately following this I am more than usually aware of the season in which we are. Autumn, with the nights closing in and the gloriously coloured leaves falling from the trees (causing the trains to run somewhat less punctually even than usual) demands that I notice it. For those who live in the North of our country where the sun seems to set shortly after lunch the reduced hours of daylight are also a daily reminder of the season. So, when St. Paul writes:

"Concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you." 1 Thess. 5:1

I think I know what he means. I just need to look about me to see what season I am in. But, that isn't really what Paul means. He's writing to the Thessalonians about where they are in history, how the day of the Lord, that imminent return of Jesus to bring this age to an end, will happen with suddenness. But, though sudden, we shouldn't be un-prepared, rather we should keep ourselves in a state of constant readiness.

The Church has its own seasons, the longest of which ("Ordinary Time"), together with British Summer Time, has just come to an end and we now find ourselves looking forward to the short Advent season, then Christmas. Well, I guess that now we at least have the word "Advent" in the name for this Sunday, it being the Second Sunday before Advent, it is not unreasonable that everywhere we are now surrounded by Christmas advertising. Of course, the advertisers didn't wait until we were this close to the Christmas season before inundating our media with their "messages" - in fact they don't usually seem even to wait until Summer is over before the first Christmas adverts begin! Quite often the message the adverts try to convey is a complete mystery to me. John Lewis are frequent offenders for me in this regard and this year's advert is no exception. Just exactly what message they want to communicate about this apparently dysfunctional family with strained relations between the generations eludes me entirely.

At least one theme does run through many adverts that does in some way coincide with a Christian understanding of Christmas – many of the adverts

are at least trying to encourage us to buy gifts to give to other people, rather than selling directly to ourselves, appealing to our generosity and desire to bring joy to others rather than to our greed. It is an often quoted phrase at this time of year:

“that it is more blessed to give than to receive”

An idea that should be at the heart of the Christmas message. I wonder, if I were to ask, how many people would be able to say where that saying comes from? Probably some would guess that it's from the Bible, perhaps even that it's something that Jesus said. Well you'd be right, sort of. It is from the Bible, and it is attributed to Jesus – but, you won't find it anywhere in the Gospels. It is actually used by Saint Paul in a sermon he preaches in Ephesus where he talks about Jesus being the one who said “It is more blessed to give than to receive”.

This morning’s Gospel reading was that well-known story, the parable of the talents. We usually think of this story as a teaching about gifts and how we should use them rather than, as the lazy slave does, hide them or bury them; but, as so often with Jesus' teaching, this story has more than one application and more than one layer of meaning. You may recall the words the reading began with were:

“The kingdom of heaven is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them.”

Sometimes, as we consider the usual allegorical interpretation of the story being about how we use our talents (the very word has come to mean gifts in English) we forget that this is another of those “kingdom” parables; Jesus told it to illustrate something important about the coming reign of God. Perhaps then, the key feature of the story is actually about the master’s return to settle accounts with his servants. Those that have made the appropriate preparation are ready when called to give account of how they have used their talents. We should also bear in mind that a talent is a huge amount of money. Even the servant who has been entrusted with just one talent has been given stewardship of about twenty years wages for a labourer, or about four thousand denarii. The amounts given to the servants would equate to a lifetimes savings.

As we approach Advent and then Christmas we should indeed be thinking about the coming of the Lord and the coming of God's kingdom. That's what the word “Advent” means, “Coming”. Last week and this we have had parables that stress how important it is to be prepared for the Lord's

coming, so perhaps in that sense those early Christmas adverts that seem to come along in August have actually got it right. It is never too early to start making preparations for the coming Kingdom of God, it is the one thing that we should absolutely never put off. But how should we prepare? Central to being ready to be a member of the body of Christ is being in a right relationship with both God and all our fellow human beings – in biblical language "with our neighbour".

Christmas and Advent are a good opportunity for each of us to consider how we have used all that the Lord has blessed us with. Remembering that Jesus taught us to consider everyone our neighbour, not just those we live amongst, but also those from different cultures, races and religions to ourselves. It is an opportunity to move from introspection, looking just at our own needs, to an outward gaze: looking to the needs of others. Remembering especially the lesson of the parable of the talents that the master may return at any moment and call us to account. The great challenge to us is in the verses that follow the parable of the talents, in Matthew 25 when the righteous ask "when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink… And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'"

Amen.