

**“FOLLOWING THE KING – 78”**

***Matthew 25:14-30***

For those of you who may be visiting this morning, and for those of you who find it difficult to remember anything from one week to the next, let me just give you a little bit of background to the story we've heard from *Matthew 25* this morning. We're slowly working our way through Matthew's Gospel, his account of the life and teaching of Jesus the Christ, the Kingly Messiah. Matthew, who leads a church made up of Jewish people who want to follow Jesus, is anxious to reassure the members of his congregation that it's OK to follow Jesus. They are not betraying their Jewish heritage by following him – in fact, Jesus is the culmination of all that was predicted by the Hebrew poets, preachers and prophets whose words they read in their Scriptures in the synagogue each week. All the prophecies about the coming Kingdom of God – the benevolent sovereign rule of God as he renews and restores his originally perfect creation – are being brought to fruition in the person of Jesus, that Kingly Messiah who, having inaugurated the life of the Kingdom here on earth, will one day return to establish its consummation.

Jesus has spent nearly three years wandering around Galilee and the surrounding regions teaching and preaching about this Kingdom and the need of all people to follow God's plan for getting the best out of life. He has told stories, preached sermons, debated with the religious and political leaders, answered questions and conversed with his close friends, followers and disciples. He has offered glimpses of what the Kingdom will be like by healing those who were sick, restoring dignity to the despised, loving the unloved, giving hope to the hopeless. And now he is approaching the hour of his destiny – the cosmic battle in which he has to engage the powers of evil on the cross before men and women can be freed from the tyranny and nihilism of sin and death.

We are in the very last week of Jesus' life before that execution. Jesus has ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, has caused mayhem in the Temple by driving out the traders and profiteers from the place of prayer, has argued with the religious leaders as they've tried to catch him out with their clever questions and has told yet more stories about what the Kingdom might be like. He's now with his little group of disciples, trying to reassure them that everything will be OK and promising them that he will one day make a spectacular return to earth to establish the Kingdom once and for all. And to help them understand something of all that, he has told some stories which relate very closely to his return and – perhaps more importantly – how his followers are to look forward to it.

What we have read this morning is the fourth and final of those stories. The first was about the thief coming in the night to burgle a house and how the homeowner should be prepared for that. He then told them about the foreman of a bunch of slaves who behaved rather badly as he wasn't expecting his master to turn up when he did. Last week we heard the story of the ten bridesmaids who all fell asleep waiting

for the bridegroom to turn up but when they awoke only half of them were really ready for the rest of the evening. They've all been about being prepared for Jesus' return – watching out, waiting, not doing anything daft that might spoil our chances of spending eternity with God in this new Kingdom.

But, as we said last week, what do we mean by “being prepared”? How should we anticipate the return of Jesus? We know from what Jesus has already said in these two chapters that his return is inevitable – there is no doubt that he will return one day. Everyone will know that he is coming back: it will not be a secret arrival. Anyone who gambles on it not taking place will be shown to be a fool. But it will also be unpredictable. No-one – not even Jesus at this point – knows exactly when it will happen. There are all kinds of signs that are referred to in the Bible but there is absolutely no point trying to work out from them the exact date and time. It seems that there is quite a long delay between Jesus promising to return and actually turning up – it's been two thousand years already – so we need to be constantly on the alert and to be prepared for his return in the sense that we're not doing anything that we wouldn't want Jesus to find us doing if he suddenly showed up.

And this fourth story gives us a bit of an insight into what we should be doing – rather than what we shouldn't. It might help us to get a bit of a handle on what Jesus is expecting of his followers as we wait patiently for that cataclysmic return. It's the story of a rich man (once again) going off on a long journey and he puts three of his slaves in charge of some of his assets. Basically, he is investing in these slaves. Now, once again, as we said last week, this is a parable with one point: it's not an allegory where we have to find significance in every detail, so we mustn't get side-tracked into trying to make all kinds of other, probably very worthy, theories fit.

The rich man distributes his wealth to these three slaves in varying amounts. Jesus talks of “*talents*”, referring to money. Our current English use of the word to mean a gift or skill (except in the case of *Britain's Got Talent*, where it means a desperate desire to show off how little skill you've got in front of an audience of millions) derives from this story, but when Jesus told it, it would only have meant money. Originally it was a weight, so the value of it differed depending on the metal involved. By Jesus' time it had come to mean a unit of currency and there are all kinds of suggestions as to how much it might have been worth. What most scholars today think is that a talent would have been the equivalent of what a working man would have taken about 15 years to earn – so these are large amounts we're talking about here: several hundreds of thousands of pounds altogether.

Two of the slaves go off and trade with their money and seem to get a pretty good return. The third slave, unprepared no doubt for the risk of losing any of the money, simply buries it (considered to be the safest place for valuables in the Ancient world) so that he can at least give back to his master what he was

originally entrusted with. The master returns “*after a long time*” – notice Jesus’ reference once again to the delay in his coming – and reckons up with the three slaves. The two who have traded and gained are rewarded, but the third, the one who has played it safe and done nothing, is punished. He knew his master would return, but he has done nothing; he has not prepared positively for his master’s return.

Now we won’t get bogged down in questions about rewards and punishments – after all, that’s not the main point of the story – but what is Jesus saying here? What is, indeed, the main point? In *The Message* translation, Eugene Peterson introduces a phrase that isn’t really there in the original, but it does help to clarify what’s going on, I think: the master says, “*It’s criminal to live cautiously like that. If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least?*” What Jesus seems to be saying is that waiting for his return is to be marked with a watchfulness that means we are constantly aware of the fact that he will come back, but it’s not just a question of sitting round idly waiting for him. It’s all to do with fulfilling our potential, with growing, cultivating and developing the resources that God has given us.

You see that in other areas of life. If you speak to a sports scientist – you may even find one to chat with over coffee this morning – you’ll discover that if you don’t use a muscle for a while, you start to lose the ability to use it at all: it wastes away and becomes useless. It’s the same with your brain – keep exercising it by reading, doing puzzles, thinking things through, and you’ll be able to use it effectively for much longer than if you just sit slack-jawed in front of the television every day. If you speak a foreign language you have to keep using that or you start to forget stuff and lose the facility to converse in it. God has given you all kinds of resources that he calls on you to use, to develop, to cultivate for him.

You may well be a follower of Jesus, but if you think that some kind of conversion experience is all you need and then you can sit back and do nothing but read *Every Day with Selwyn Hughes*, you’re not going to make any progress in your life of discipleship and, what’s more, you’re not going to fulfil Jesus’ investment in you. Being a Christian is not about playing it safe, about sitting back and just waiting for Jesus to turn up again. As William Barclay puts it, “*There can be no religion without adventure.*” Or as Commissioned sang more recently about living as a disciple of Jesus, “*Ordinary Just Won’t Do*”.

Jesus calls you to a life of commitment, of adventure, of risk. It’s not about playing safe and just keeping what you’ve got. When Jesus spoke these words he was probably forty-eight hours away from being nailed to a cross, taking the greatest risk of all. After all, there was no guarantee that anyone would respond to that astonishing demonstration of sacrificial love. If we claim to follow Jesus, then we follow him down that road along which anything can happen. The trouble is, some of us aren’t following down the road but sitting in the bus stop beside it expecting Jesus to pick us up on the way back. That’s not how it works, folks!

You'll notice that the three slaves were all given different amounts of money. The point of story is not about the amounts of money – so, again, no point speculating about why that should have happened – but about what was done with the money whatever the amount. It's not the quantity of your abilities and resources that's important – we're all very different in that respect – but it's what we do with them, how we are investing them for the Kingdom. There are currently some exciting possibilities for us as a church and our work in this community which we're praying about as elders – and we'll say a bit more about at the next Church Meeting – but that will almost certainly involve an element of risk. Do we just want to sit back and enjoy our nicely decorated premises or do we want to get involved in the adventure of God's will for us here at the heart of this city?

And what does this all look like on a personal level? Jesus has given his all for you: he risked absolutely everything. How do you respond to that? Are you ready to invest what you've been given for him? We've all been given something – some have wealth, some have very particular skills and abilities, some have time, some have expertise, some have influence, some have property, some have the strength of their personality – so how will you, as a follower of Jesus, invest that for the good of the Kingdom of God? Clearly, sitting back and doing nothing is not an option (unless you're wanting to end up in *“the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”* – whatever that represents, it doesn't sound too much fun!). Get on and live courageously for God – speak out, risk stuff, get involved.

We're going to be moving on into the last part of this chapter very soon and, in some ways, it's quite scary stuff. But in other ways it's quite mundane. It's about using your time and energy and resources to offer others glimpses of God's Kingdom – and in so doing, serving Jesus the Kingly Messiah. But more of that when we get to it – I don't want to spoil the excitement! This morning, ask yourself – or ask God to show you – what you could be doing to make the most of what God has given you. If you're just out for an easy ride, fair enough, that's your decision – but there's a real adventure out there for those who want to take up the challenge.

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. How does the prospect of Jesus' return affect your life day by day? Has reading these stories made any difference to that?
2. "*There can be no religion without adventure.*" (William Barclay) Is that true of Christianity (don't spend time discussing other religions!)? How have you experienced that adventure?
3. What might you be called on to risk for Jesus? And what is the return on that risk?
4. Why isn't playing it safe an option for us as followers of Jesus? (Or is it?)
5. What might we as a church be called to risk in our mission to our community?