

Last week Jan, in his sermon, quoted the unofficial creed of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. 'Be vigilant, be watchful, be prepared.' The cry has gone out across the U.S. of A to be ready, be alert to anything that might smack of terrorism or might help people safe guard themselves against natural disaster.

It really does sound like the biblical injunction found in the parable of the ten bridesmaids that we heard about last week. The bridesmaids were to be watching and waiting for the bridegroom to arrive so that they would be ready to greet him. In telling this story Jesus was urging his disciples to be ready for his second coming.

Our gospel reading this morning is linked to and follows on from the story of the ten bridesmaids. The bridesmaids were exhorted to be prepared, the servants in this morning's reading are expected to be productive. The bridesmaids are to be watching whereas the servants are to be working. Both parables characterize those who eagerly wait for the coming of the Lord.

As Jan said watching and waiting are not passive activities, we don't sit on our hands as it were watching the world go by. It is the need to work and be productive that this parable encourages. A similar parable in Luke's gospel states it this way: 'occupy till I come....or do business till I come....'

Three men were given talents, a talent is a great deal of money in excess of one thousand dollars in today's terms. Some commentators believe a sum of up to \$300,000 may have been involved. This story is not just about money management although the principles encouraged here apply in the area of our finances.

Anything whereby we may glorify God is a talent. Our gifts, abilities, opportunities, influence, knowledge, health, strength, money, time, senses, reason, intellect, memory, affections, the privileges we have as members of Christ's church, these are all talents. '*Count your blessings name them one by one....*' I am increasingly aware of the value of friends in my life, what treasures they are. The real wealth in life is not in money but rather in relationships.

Each servant is given the amount the master knows is appropriate, he knew the ability and the experience of each and what they could handle. The servants knew very well what was expected of them, they had been entrusted with the master's great wealth, all he owns is in their hands and they were expected to multiply this resource and bring a return. They knew the master would at some stage return and demand an accounting.

The five and two talent servants go out immediately and begin to trade, doubling the money they were given. They are commended by the master and their rewards are commensurate with their faithfulness in pursuing the master's interests. The other digs a hole and buries his talent. The practice of hiding valuables in the ground was common. It was one of the safest but less profitable ways of protecting possessions. This servant didn't lose the money, but he didn't earn a return. If this were to take place today the would be worth less due to inflation. This servant returns the talent, and then goes on to insult his master, by saying, 'I knew that you were a harsh man , reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed', this was the excuse he offered for being afraid and not investing the money that had been entrusted to him.

The master answers him in an interesting manner, he restates the accusation the servant made but he re-phrases it as a question. 'you knew, did you, that I reap where I do not sow, and gather

where I did not scatter?’ The master is not agreeing with what the servant says, he is saying in effect, ‘how could you know such a thing? Is that really your understanding of my character?’ The servant’s words could well be a classic case of what we would call today ‘Freudian projection’. As an excuse and a defense of his behaviour, the servant, a wicked and lazy man, accuses the master of being harsh. If he can shift responsibility for his undesirable traits onto someone else then he won’t have to deal with them. The master is not impressed and he takes the talent and gives it to the servant who had ten, and says ‘*to all those who have more will be given, and they will have in abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.*’ Now you might say, ‘that’s not fair!’ But, it is a principle of life that we lose what we don’t use. Muscles need to be used to keep strong and functional. We need to keep learning, stretching our brains lest they stop working as we would like them to. We have a confidence gap to bridge if we stop doing what we do for some reason, and then come back to it after some absence.

Let’s look at the two different attitudes displayed by the servants.

The first two came before the master on his return and said ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents’ or two talents as in the case of the second servant. ‘And see, look, behold, taa daa.... Can’t you sense the energy, the excitement, in their voices, see I have made this much more. The third man comes, I could imagine rather reluctantly, and says, Master I knew that you were a harsh man...

The two servants have their focus upon the master ,and begin by saying ‘Master, you.....’

The third was a self conscious, ‘Master I ...’

The two servants had a relationship with the master that the third didn’t have, the third man’s relationship was characterized by fear and anxiety.

In the light of the worldwide economic meltdown, this story is highly relevant. In difficult times such as these the temptation is to live in fear rather than faith. But let us be influenced by the two faithful servants and *their* understanding of the Master.

They understood the privilege of being entrusted with great wealth, what a confidence booster it was to them, faith rose within them and they were motivated to go at once and begin to put that faith into practice and they were rewarded for their efforts.

We have been entrusted with great wealth each of us in different ways and different capacities. Whether you are faithful in a little or in a lot God is equally pleased. You know even a cup of cold water given in the name of Christ will have its reward What an amazing privilege it is to be called ‘co-workers with God.’ Jesus followers asked him, ‘what must we do to perform the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him who he has sent.’ Our reading in Thessalonians spoke to us about taking up the breastplate of faith and love. Faith is a work in itself and loving you neighbour is sometimes hard work!

I am a great believer in doing what I do with the maximum of enjoyment and the minimum of stress. We are meant to enjoy our work. As we accept our talents as God’s gift to us, our work becomes an overflow of our faith and the grace that God has worked in us... Listen to St Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthian church, he says, ‘whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. You are the only person who can use your ability, do so in the knowledge that you can’t help but succeed if you are doing what God wants you to do. Do what you do with a commitment to excellence and never give up. Whatever the job is, do it the very best you can and make it shine.

Readiness for Jesus' return demands faithfulness in being prepared and productive. In watching and working. Let's enjoy the process and bring glory to God. Amen.