

Transition often provides occasion to look backwards and to look forwards. I am so grateful for all the ways in which God has blessed our life together these past six and a half years – in ways I could not have even dreamed of back in July 2014. This morning's readings remind us of the importance also of keeping our gaze fixed on where we are headed.

Another church year is drawing to a close. The final Sunday in our calendar is the Reign of Christ next weekend. This Sunday as with last week, the church through the readings she has chosen, directs our attention to Jesus' Second Coming. And we are told to be ready. We are warned in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians that we are to be on the look-out for '... the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night...;' (5.2) and furthermore there will be '... sudden destruction... and there will be no escape!' (5.3)

Bracing stuff. At the same time Paul reminds his readers that we are to trust in God, and in God's ultimate intention for us. God is not out to destroy us, but to save us, to reconcile and restore us, to make us whole again. '... For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ' (5.9). Even as we keep a weather eye out for the return of our Lord, which will happen, we are to trust in God's good purposes for us here and now.

Even with Paul's encouragement to trust, there's a risk when confronted with readings about our need to be ready for the Final Judgment that we tune out. Many of us already come to church thinking that we don't quite measure up. Readings about sudden destruction simply add to the burden we are already carrying. The Gospel may add even further to the load.

It is a Gospel with which many of you are probably familiar. A master going on a journey entrusts his servants with varying amounts of his property according to their abilities. He returns after a long time, and settles accounts with the servants to whom he entrusted his assets. He commends two of the servants, those who doubled the master's investments. He gives them more responsibility and bids them enter into his joy. The third servant is frightened of his master and simply buries the investment. When he returns the original sum to his master, the master is furious. He strips this servant of what he has given him, transfers it to the one who already has an abundance and banishes him. I wonder how many of you squirm a bit when you hear this parable, particularly those of us who are cautious by nature... those of us more likely to play safe with something given to us than risk it all? Yet again we may catch ourselves thinking we don't quite measure up.

What do we make of this? This morning, it is vital that we hear the good news of Jesus Christ as the gospel of grace. Life in God is never about having to measure up, about struggling to make the cut, to avoid the fate of the third servant. We don't need to worry about being thrown into the outer darkness, 'where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Grace tells us that God in Jesus Christ accepts us as, where and how we are. Grace tells us that God welcomes us into fellowship with him as, where and how we are. We are saved by grace through faith, and this not of ourselves, it is a gift of God; we are not saved by our works, however diligent or however lax our efforts may be. Our being put right with God, our being brought into fellowship with God, with each other and with ourselves is God's gift to us. God's grace is freely given.

It is not to say that how we respond to God's gift is irrelevant. All of the parables in this chapter of Matthew's Gospel indicate that how we respond does matter: serving faithfully even if the bridegroom is delayed in coming, using our talents wisely, serving Jesus in ministering to the hungry, naked, thirsty, and lonely. Of course it matters how we respond to God's grace. However, it is always God's grace that is first; it is God's grace that ensures our eternal fellowship with him. Salvation is not about our need to measure up because God in Christ has already measured up for us.

Perhaps the one point we can take from the three servants as we look ahead together at St. Mark's is that loving is about risking. Our fellowship with God is assured through Christ by his Spirit. We don't need to earn or prove anything. We are called to love as he loved us. And love means stepping out at times. Perhaps this is what the master, thought to be Jesus in this parable, upbraids the third servant about. There is nothing wrong with being cautious or prudent or deliberate. Many of us are just that. Taken too far however being cautious or prudent or deliberate can then become withdrawing altogether and just looking out for ourselves.

Love calls us to risk – not just to risk in our relationships with each other, but to risk in living and sharing what we have been so freely given – the good news of God that we are loved and accepted just as we are. Two servants risked and stepped out and were blessed in their ventures; the third retreated in fear and was called on it.

As we celebrate and give thanks for all the ways in which God has blessed our life together across six and a half years, may we give thanks especially for God's grace freely given. And let us ask our Lord for courage as we move forward to risk in love, not to retreat; and to lean into the new ways of being church that a pandemic has opened up for us. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.