Sermon – 3rd Before Lent: Talents

If you were in church a fortnight ago you will know that I am in the middle of preaching a sermon series on faithful stewardship. Two weeks ago, I preached on the stewardship of our time, today I will turn our minds towards the stewardship of our talents, and in two weeks’ time I will address the question of wealth. In their different ways each of these themes force us to confront our relationship with God. How we think about the stewardship of our talents will reflect how we think about God and the part God and faith plays in our life.

Let’s begin – as I did a fortnight ago – with what scripture tells us about our relationship with God.

For this I turn to the Psalmist and to Psalm 139.

O Lord, you have searched me and known me!  
**2**You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
    you discern my thoughts from afar.  
**3**You search out my path and my lying down  
    and are acquainted with all my ways.  
**4**Even before a word is on my tongue,  
    behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.  
**5**You hem me in, behind and before,  
    and lay your hand upon me.  
**6**Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
    it is high; I cannot attain it.

And so on…

However familiar you are with this Psalm, go home and read it again today in full. It is the most beautiful description of our inseparability from God. Peter in his first letter put it even more succinctly:

*God is love, and those who live in love, live in God and God lives in them.*

Our relationship with God – by virtue of being created, not by virtue of anything we have achieved – is indescribably intimate. That may not be how we experience God all the time – for after all, we all wander far from God – but this divine intimacy with God’s creation is the natural order of things. We are intricately bound up with God’s nature.

This has huge implications for how we understand ourselves and how we view ourselves. For rarely – if ever – would we have a sufficiently secure view of ourselves to declare that the divine presence is within us. And yet that is what Paul teaches with remarkable consistency – and given his personal history, he knows more about forgiveness and redemption than we do.

Christians have a remarkable track record for doing themselves down and, as a result, have been responsible for unleashing untold damage and pain on others. I don’t do doctrine at the best of times but to my mind you can put both the doctrine of original sin and the doctrine of the atonement into the theological dustbin, for both ideas have done immense damage to untold beautiful human beings that have been taught that they are worth nothing, when the absolute opposite is the case.

Each one of you is a precious child of God and whatever your personal history and whatever your age this morning, you still have wonderful contributions to make to the Kingdom of God here on earth.

For part of our gifting as human beings is that we are talented.

Now, if like me, you went through school being told the opposite far too often for the good of your mental health, or even worse, heard negative comments at home far more frequently than you heard positive comments…please…let the Good News of Jesus Christ chip away at all that inherited nonsense.

For in Jesus we have the key to unlock all our potential for the benefit of ourselves and others.

Even an occasional reader of the gospels will see the transformation that Jesus brings to communities of people otherwise excluded from their social networks – women, the sick and disabled and children being His particular focus. But in every instance, inclusion brings responsibility. To be included in the Kingdom of God as a full human being, made and cherished as a Child of God, means liberation from whatever dehumanised you in the eyes of your peers, in order to be liberated for the Kingdom of God. Salvation in Christ never leads to an eternity of selfish leisure time and recreation, but always to intentional, purposeful living through which one glorifies God through the exercise of the precise gifts bestowed upon us.

We who know we are loved by God, rescued from the world by God, re-discovered in our full humanity by God, we all need to re-examine how we are using the gifts and talents that we have been bequeathed by God for the glory of God.

In our culture which remains dominated by the Protestant Work Ethic and by a devotion to economic growth that – and this is becoming increasingly evident - holds within it the seeds of our ultimate and total destruction: in our culture, the nurture of our talents is far too closely identified with our working lives as if no one before or without employment has anything to offer and no one post-employment has anything left to offer either.

This is such nonsense of course and yet to question it still sounds somewhat controversial.

At any given period of our lives it is the intensity with which our talents are applied for the glory of God that is important. And our talents evolve and change over time.

As Christians called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we are called to help empower others, to help bring to light the latent talents and gifts that others – through modesty or rejection – have been hiding.

This Christian vocation is rapidly rising to prominence as the church’s teaching begins to focus on the importance of our discipleship Monday-Saturday and not simply on our faithfulness to the Church through Sunday worship.

So where do we begin.

First, I encourage you to do some personal reflection, perhaps with the help of a close and trusted friend. Looking back on your life, can you trace the gentle guiding, nurturing Spirit of God leading you forwards through all the twists and turns that inevitably beset us? How has God gently steered and stirred you?

Confidence in God’s presence through your life, encourages one to have confidence in God’s future guiding too. As age creeps upon us, we tend to focus our minds on what we cannot do, what we are no longer able to do, the passions and enthusiasms that we’ve had to let go.

But this always creates space for new adventures, new applications of talents that we still have or can still develop.

Vanstone, in his wonderful book, *The Stature of Waiting*, shows how the most fruitful part of Jesus’ ministry was after his arrest when he was totally dependent on others and completely unable to shape events. Ageing may feel a little like that and certainly any kind of confinement may. Yet we haven’t suddenly become devoid of talent simply because we cannot do what we used to find so fulfilling. Time and again I have sat with people whose lives are slowly ebbing away and found myself learning so much about life in the presence of its passing. Our talent to witness to the love of God never leaves us.

So, wherever you find yourself on life’s journey this morning, remember that the talents God has given you are far broader, deeper, longer-lasting than any worldly assessment of your worth, past or present. You are a child of God, a disciple of Christ, and the world needs the talents God has given you this very hour.

Amen.