

CORE TASK – SERVICE
MATTHEW 25:14-30

A man was walking past quarry where some men were working; four of them were cutting stone from the quarry and working hard at it! The man was fascinated by what they were doing so he went in to quarry to ask them what they were doing:

- The first man he met said “I’m cutting a stone” and he talked about what he was working on, shaping the stone into a regular shape and that was his job; that was what he was supposed to do when he came to work every morning and if didn’t do the job would get into trouble.
- The second man said “I’m making money”. He saw that at the end of the day he would get paid for what he did and that was the most important thing to him; he was also cutting a stone, but he saw this as a way of making money to buy food, clothes, and to keep his family.
- The third man said “I’m making a cathedral”. He saw more than just the stone; he knew where the stone was going and that it would become part of this great building that would stand for years in the centre of the city and people would admire it and say ‘what a wonderful building; I wonder who built it!’ He had a sense of satisfaction and achievement in his work.
- The fourth man said “I’m serving God and giving glory to God”. He saw that his talent for cutting stone was a talent that God had given him and he wanted to use that talent to honour God. By using his talent to cut stone and doing that very well, he was saying ‘thank you’ to God for giving him the talent and the opportunity and so he was showing other people how good and great God is.

All 4 men were doing same the job; they were all cutting stone into regular shapes from rough chunks in the quarry; but they saw the job in different ways; for some it was just a job, a way of using tools and cutting stone; for others it was all about the money they could make by doing this job; another saw that it was more than just a job, being part of some great building project; finally one saw that what he did would honour God, it was his service to God.

Service is the last of the 5 Core Tasks of the Church in Juniper Green. In 2001, we identified these 5 Core Tasks as the central priorities for the Church, the main things to which God has called us as His Church in this community. Every so often we have revisited these Core Tasks to remind ourselves of these priorities and that’s what we’ve been doing these last few weeks. The previous four sermons are in print on the website and the audio versions are in the library. The last, but by no means the least of these, is service. Service is a word that means lots of different things, but the basic New Testament notion is that the Christian is a servant. Jesus came to serve: washing His disciples’ feet is a pivotal moment in our understanding of Jesus’ heart, the servant come to serve. Jesus was a servant in two senses: first of all, He came to serve God and do the will of God; secondly, He came to serve other people and meet their needs, and ultimately to serve us and our needs by giving His life on cross, the ultimate act of service. We serve God and other people because Jesus has called and commanded us to copy Him; as He has done, so we are to do; Jesus the servant is our role model for our attitude to life.

The Parable of the Talents in Matthew chapter 25 is a picture of service. Basically, it is a picture of responsible service that produces results that the master can see and approve, a picture of opportunities to be to be faithfully put to good use. It is the story of a master and his three servants. The master is going away so he gives 3 of his servants a sum of money each to look after on his behalf. The Talent is a sum of money equal to 6000 denarii, even then a large sum, and equivalent today to thousands of pounds. The

first servant is given five talents; the second is given two and the third is given one talent, reflective of their different qualities, skills and abilities. The first servant puts his money to work, as does the second, but the third digs a hole in the ground and hides his. When the master returns, they are called to account: the first servant has doubled his master's money and is commended: *"Well done..."* (v21) The second servant has done the same and he receives the same commendation. The third is different: *"Master..."* (21:24f) The master is angry at this servant's wasted opportunities and so he throws him out into outer darkness.

At heart of this story is a master who is going away and later coming back. The context for the story is the sense of Jesus' going away and promising to come again to the world. The Church in its early days had a strong sense of waiting and anticipation for Jesus' return, that He would come again soon to the world. So the disciples had to be ready for His return; they had to live life in the light of that promise and the hope that Jesus will come again. So they were to be ready and there are several pieces here in Matthew 25 about being ready. We've lost that sense of anticipation; 2000 years have passed and that sense of eager anticipation is no longer part of the Church's DNA. There is a danger is that we've completely lost any idea of Jesus' coming again to world, that it is no longer part of our vocabulary as Christians. But the promise is still there; it is still part of the hope and the promise of the gospel and so we should still live in the light of that hope and learn to 'be ready'.

'Talents' in the story are sums of money. Three servants are each given different sums; servants one and two both use their talents wisely and are commended in exactly same way; so the exact sum of money is not important. What matters is that the servants use it wisely. The third servant is blamed for doing nothing. It is an easy leap to make to think of these talents as our gifts and skills, what we're good at; and the challenge then is to use these gifts and skills in God's service. It doesn't matter what these gifts and skills are; we all have at least one gift and skill; the challenge for us is to use that gift and skill to serve God and other people. There are all kinds of opportunities for service that present themselves to us; our work is an opportunity to serve God if we see it that way (go back to the stone cutters!); there are opportunities to serve people within the Church, or in the community. All that Jesus expects of us is that we use our individual gifts and skills and take these individual opportunities to serve.

The first two servants are great! These are the high-fliers of the servant world, the self-starters: "here's a chance to do something good for the Master; let's see what we can do"; so they get on with it. There are not many of them around, but they are the kind of people who say "I'm here; what can I do?" and offer themselves to do whatever is needed and they give of their time and energy for the sake of the Church or the community. They throw themselves into it and you can see the fruit of their labours after a time. They go about their work humbly, with a servant spirit that doesn't want to draw attention to themselves or their achievements; they are content that God sees what they do, and they make no fuss. God knows how they serve and the fruit of their service becomes obvious and God is pleased. This would be the ideal to which we should all aspire; to take opportunities presented to us and run with them as faithful servants, active, responsible, and ready.

But let's look at the third servant. What did he say? *"Master..."* (25:24f) "I was afraid". Fear! How strong is fear! We see an opportunity to serve and there's a battle going on inside: "will I, won't I?" Part of you says "What a great opportunity"; another part says "it's too risky". Fear is a hugely powerful force in our lives: the fear of failure, the loss of our self-esteem because we fail; the power of "what if..." is so often a negative force, that

makes us see the risks and hold back. There is also the fear that God will ask something of us that we're just not capable of and that He's not big enough to take care of us when we get in over our heads. We need to be wise: this is not about doing jobs that we're just not gifted to do; if we are a square peg in a round hole, the only answer is to get out! I read something other day that suggests we are most worried culture that has ever lived and that fear simply dominates our need for security. The third servant "substituted security for service" (RT France); he played safe and so he achieved nothing; he saw the risks and decided not to take them, but to hide the money away just in case he lost it. Fear lost him his destiny, lost him everything.

We are all unique individuals. Isn't that a glorious thing to see? Churches are made up of all kinds of people, who are good at all kinds of things. Your gifts and skills are different from mine – how boring Church would be if everyone was like me! The opportunities you have to serve God and other people are different from the opportunities that are presented to me. That's not the question. Don't spend your life wishing you were someone else! Spend your life using your unique God-given skills and gifts to serve God and other people; spend your life taking your unique God-given opportunities for service. For some that will mean Christian leadership; for some it will mean visiting people to encourage them and walk alongside them through life; for some it will mean teaching children and young people in school; for some it will mean being a good lawyer, engineer, gardener, shop assistant, waiter; etc etc. Every one of us is unique, with unique skills and gifts and the challenge for us is to be responsible, active, faithful disciples of Jesus and servants of God.

"Do not be afraid" – one of the most common commands in the Bible; someone suggested that it is there over 300 times! Often attached to that command is God's promise "I am with you!" Willie is an elder of Church; he was asked to be part of a worship team and he eventually agreed; he sat at the first meeting and said "I'm not sure why I'm here" and the first time he took part in a service he was more nervous than he had ever been in his life. Later he said "This is the hardest thing I have ever done. I'll try it again, but if it is no better, I'll have to give up." He did it again and was better – a little! 14 years on he's still there; he's still part of that team. Even at that first meeting, he came well-prepared, with thoughts and ideas for readings, prayers and hymns and he contributed marvellously to the team's work. I take my hat off to him and to his courage; there is nothing special about Willie and you wouldn't notice him in a crowd, but I admire his courage and his faith, taking the risk, and so he took the opportunity to serve; a man with courage in his heart, a man of faith.

Ready to serve: are we a Church ready to serve people in the community? As individuals are we ready to serve God and other people? There is no shortage of gifts and skills; there is no shortage of opportunities! "Active, responsible, faithful service which produces results." (RT France) That's the challenge that service presents us with as a Core Task of the Church, to be people ready to use our gifts and skills, ready to take opportunities, ready to serve God and other people for His glory and praise. "I did a hard thing. I took on a challenge. It worked!" – how would that feel? What a good day that would be! "I had an opportunity. I took the easy way out. I didn't do it!" That feels a whole lot different, doesn't it! Active, responsible, faithful service – that's our calling as Christians; that's our calling as Church. What will Jesus say of us when He looks at what we have done with these opportunities *"Well done..."* How good does that sound?