

Last Sunday night as part of our 5pm service in talking about remembrance we also reflected on the place of lament. The place of being honest before God about how we are feeling. To be honest before God however requires our image of God to be one that invites us to be open; a God who welcomes us and loves us.

The image of God often focused on from our Gospel reading today is one of a harsh judgemental king – but it's not the only image in this story. There is also a God who trusts those who are his servants so much they are given an immense gift to look after.

If we think about the way we view people, particularly people in authority, it often has as much to do with our own competencies and insecurities as it does theirs. This is also the case when we describe and talk about God. So much of how we describe or interpret God to others reflects our perceptions.

Often when I talk to people about how they are going with God I often find that people do not believe that God will forgive them. When you dig, this is often because that person finds it hard to forgive others, or it can be that they find it hard to forgive themselves.

Equally often those who cannot believe God loves them can find it hard to allow others to love them too, or for them to love any one – or to even love themselves.

Often we talk about the importance context of the biblical text; but equally important is the preconceptions we bring to the things we read and pray. If we are not open to hearing something different or experiencing God anew, then we may miss out on the depth of relationship and love God longs to offer.

Now Matthew is no different to us, his recording of the parables has a judgemental feel of the end times. He felt that people had much to lose and very little time to change. The 3rd servant who is fearful and gives rise to this image of an 'angry' God – and while we cannot totally do away with the judgement in this parable, I think we can misinterpret the servant's situation. The servants are entrusted with a huge amount – a talent is roughly equivalent to just over £ 1 million. The land owner goes away for a long period so they are obviously trusted, even if one of them does fear. But I am intrigued that we always focus on the description given by the third servant and not the other two.

If we look at the text as a whole we notice that only one of the three servants fears and landowner who obviously trusts them as he gives them a huge amount to look after and goes away for a long time! Equally the landowner rejoices at what the first two servants have done – but then he has made a lot of money. But also notice the

indignation of the Master at being told they knew he was a harsh man – and how he then treats the servant based on his *characterization*¹.

Theologian David Lose suggests that in view of this – maybe the point of the story is about how we see God, rather than about the way that a ‘fearful’ servant might behave!

Often this parable has been read either as a warning against laziness in light of the landowner’s (God’s/Christ’s) eventual return or as an exhortation to be actively preparing for the day of reckoning when all accounts will be settled. (in fact as a child everyone in our Sunday School was given a dollar and given three months to make the most of it – we were told not to be the third servant). But maybe that is not the point – maybe instead this might be a warning about how we picture God. About how we imagine God wants to interact with us. About how we assess God’s character interactions with us.² Maybe there are questions that also need to be asked about the experiences of injustice and exclusion the third servant has had in life?

I find this a really helpful to consider as we come to the end of Kingdom season and move towards Advent – a period of the year which has traditionally focused on being prepared and ready for the coming of Christ. But maybe the point of Kingdom Season is not about what we are doing – but what we are seeing and being – how we think and pray and promote our relationship with God. Maybe it is a time when we should think about the baggage we place on God, the unrealistic expectations maybe we have of our faith, or even ourselves; as well as the unjust constructs of our society that do not allow us to see God in all God’s wonder.

There are days at the moment when things are really difficult for all of us, and I suspect in many different ways. Our expectations of ourselves and others under lockdown are at times at their breaking point. There may be times when we want to cry out to God and yell ‘why?’ There may be times when we treat each other badly, when we do not agree with decisions that have been made, or care that has been offered. I know that some of you are angry for example that the church is closed most of the time; others feel safer knowing we are. Our emotion and expectations of society impacts on our behaviour – just as it did for each of the characters in the parable.

It makes me wonder about the third servant in the story – why did he feel fearful of the landowner? Why was he frightened of the gift he was given and the task he had been set? What life experience meant he could not trust this Lord! It was most likely a very valid reason – so why doesn’t the master notice the impact he is having?

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/11/pentecost-24-a-wysiwig/>

² <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/11/pentecost-24-a-wysiwig/>

It made me wonder about our relationships with God – what makes us fearful of God – and for some of us, what makes us fearful of the concept of God? What frightens us or limits us from fulfilling the gifts which God has given us?

I wonder what image of God we have, and if that image limits not only our faith – but our ability to respond to God’s call. Similarly – how does our image of God enliven us – inspire us – help us to move forward and be all that God has created us to see. How do this help us to live more generously and justly?

During the week my sister-in-law in Australia sent me a photo of a field of ripe barley ready to harvest. The sky was blue and the Harvest plentiful – it was beautiful. She had sent me a photo from almost the same spot this time last year where the barren land was dry and cracked after years and years of drought; and the farm was overshadowed by a red and haze and smoke as town was surrounded by three different bushfires. It took a while of looking at the photo to realise it was the same place – that in this year while we have been locked inside and I have not been able to visit – the landscape had changed so much.

So much of what we see – whether with our eyes, or our hearts or even our knowledge informs how we understand ourselves and who God is – and it can often be distorted by other things that are going on around us. I think the challenge of today’s reading, as we prepare for Advent is to consider the image of ‘God with us’ that informs our faith. Maybe for us this year Advent might be a time when we assess our assumptions about God, and dare to see our faith anew – where we are challenged to ask the question ‘what needs to change – for me, for this church, for our society’. Often it is only when we step back and take time to recalibrate that we can see what it is that God is saying to us clearly. Amen.