Master and servants
25th Sunday after Pentecost, November 15 2026
Psalm 90; Matthew 25:14-30
Very Rev Susan Brown, locum minister

Reflection
It's not about the money…

Have you heard that story we've just listened to before? About servants being entrusted with their master's money while he goes off on his wanders? I'm sure some of you will have…

Is it a story you *like*? Or…?

I'm asking because if I'm honest, I would have to say it's a story that leaves me feeling more than just a little uncomfortable.

There's that poor third servant, who's so scared of his master that he *buries* the money he's been entrusted with – just in case he loses any of it. Then when he hands it all *back*… his master calls him "useless" and has him thrown out into the darkness where there's wailing and gnashing of teeth!

Is that not a bit harsh? I know he didn't *make* any money for his master – but he didn't *lose* any either!

And while the master's "Why didn't you at least put my money in the bank so that it could earn some interest?" sounds like a pretty *reasonable* question for the master to ask… that really wasn't an option *open* to the people of Jesus' faith at that time. In fact, it was a practice that was directly *forbidden* in the Scriptures (*Exodus* 22:25; *Leviticus* 25:35-38) and considered unethical. Banks were not really a thing back then…. Especially for God's people.

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But what makes me even *more* uncomfortable is the way people assume the master in the story is meant to represent Jesus!

Do you remember how the third servant *described* his master when that master returned? He said to his face…. "I know you are a *hard* man; I know you reap harvests where you did not plant, and you gather crops where you did not scatter seed."

The master sounds as though he's not exactly the nicest person in the world, doesn't he? There seems to be more than just a hint that he's *selfish*. And greedy. A bully even. As well as completely self-centred. Do people honestly think *Jesus* is like that?

Is Jesus not far more likely to give *away* what he has, rather than store up more for himself? Think about the things we're told he did. Did he not give up his own *life* for the sake of everyone else!!

Was he not *always* way more concerned about *others* than he ever was about himself? Especially the least and the lost.

I can't see anything in the master that resembles Jesus! In fact, I'd go so far as to say, he might well be the polar *opposite* of Jesus!

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So what is it Jesus is telling us here in this weird and uncomfortable tale? What's the message we're to take away?

I think perhaps we're supposed to focus on the *servants* rather than the master – but through the *eyes* of the master – because the master is the one who sets the tone for what it is the servants are to do – and what the master wants of those servants – is for them to *keep* working, whether or not their master is there. But even more importantly, they're to keep working *to* their *master's* agenda. And in *that* regard, I guess the master in the story *is* like Jesus.

Jesus too, sets the tone for what he expects from those who follow him. Jesus too, wants those who call him 'Lord' to work to *his* agenda – his priorities. Even when they can't see him.

Only… *Jesus'* expectations and agenda, couldn't *be* more different from those of the *story's* more selfish master! That said…

This is where the third servant falls down.

The man who buried the money he'd been given and went about his usual business without bothering about what his master expected from him, *showed* that he was more bothered about saving his *own* skin than he was about sticking to the priorities of the one who'd left him with a job to do. This thid man, as soon as his master was out of sight, abandoned following his master's wishes. Completely.

Once more, the story gets uncomfortable. But for a very different reason.

The question this tale leaves us with is… how good are *we* at sticking to *Jesus'* example and agenda – when we think Jesus isn't looking?

Do we *keep* doing as Jesus asks? Or do we let things slip?

Food for thought…

Reflecting more
…Is it?

I suppose the question is not just what do you *do* when no one is watching – it's: who you *are* when no one is watching. Because what we do when we're left to our own devices, really does reveal something of our *true* selves… our true nature…

This story we're looking at, as you've probably already guessed, is not really about *money*.

It's about where our priorities lie. Particularly as people of *faith*.

Are we serious about wanting to follow in Jesus' footsteps? Or are we, like the third slave who, when his master wasn't immediately around, set his master's wishes to one side and carried on doing what *he* wanted to do?

It's true, it's not easy to stick with an agenda someone else has set for us (think diets or exercise regimes…) – but as Christians, as Jesus' people, is that not what we sign up for? To *follow* where Jesus leads?

And in a sense, it's *easier* for us than it was for the third man in Jesus' story. The third man knew *his* master was a "hard man" - so the story said. He knew his master was always on the make and out for what he could get for himself.

The Lord *we* follow is quite different. *He* wants what's best for *us* – not for himself. He wants what's best for *all* God's people. And for the whole of creation.

The third man couldn't be sure how his master would react if things didn't go so well and he *lost* what he'd given him – and that became his excuse for not even *trying* to follow *his* master's wishes…

For us, our master is far more lovingly predictable!

Jesus offers forgiveness and fresh starts whenever any of us gets things wrong. He promises to stand by us…

and to be there to pick us up when we fall. He *never* threatens to wash his hands of us, as the master in the story did…

Instead, Jesus *longs* for us to keep trying – and offers us all the help and encouragement we could ever need to do just that.

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So why are we so reluctant to stick with Jesus' agenda?

Because, to put it bluntly, it means putting *Jesus* front and centre of our lives… and *not* us and ours… *or* what *we* think and want…

And that's hard for us as human beings – to live really *trusting* that Jesus knows best…. It's hard for us to live letting the *faith* we have *set* our priorities – in *every* aspect of our lives….

Because we like to be in control. We like to think we know… And we *worry* about letting go… We worry about where that might *lead*… *and* about what it means Jesus might *ask* of us….

But the clue is in the title. We are Jesus' servants. We are Jesus' *followers.* We are to take our *lead* from him!

What Jesus *looks* for from us… the agenda he wants us to stick to - even when we think no one is looking…. Is nothing more and nothing less than for us to do as *he* would do.

That's it. It's really quite simple… And yet so, so exacting!!

If we are to carry on *our* master's work *as* he has entrusted us to do, then we need to do the sorts of things Jesus did… Playing it safe… or doing little or nothing… can never be an option. We are to *risk* putting our feet, our hands, our hearts, where Jesus puts his… Always.

Which means loving God *enough* to risk loving others as *we* ourselves are loved. Even, as I say, when we think no one is watching. Even when we think no one is *listening*.

And loving others like that, *for* Jesus' sake, covers those we'd rather *not* like as much as it does those we find it easy to love….

It means being Christ-like to everyone; to those who wind us up…every bit as much as to those whose company we enjoy…

it means caring about those who make us feel uncomfortable… *and* those whose stories we barely listen to… or *doubt*…. It means getting involved in the lives of those we'd rather *not* get involved with… And it means caring about those no one else cares about – and doing these things even when it involves swimming against the societal tide… and being given a hard time *because* we care….

We are called to *dare* to do what Jesus did – *and does*… we are called to *risk* being more like him. *That's* the Jesus agenda we're to follow.

And while that feels *huge*, it pales into insignificance when you consider the even *greater* risk *Jesus* took, in daring to trust *us* to work *with* him to expand and bring in God's kingdom!

Like all three servants, each and every one of us has been entrusted with this amazing kingdom-growing task and each of us has been given God-given gifts to grow and to use to help us as we go.

And we are *not* to do the good old Presbyterian thing and think *our* gifts don't matter… or that those gifts are too small or inconsequential to be of any use… that was the third servant's downfall… we're to use *whatever* we have – and *not* sit back leaving others, whom we think are *more* favoured, to get on with the job –

All of us are called…. No exceptions.

What do you do when no one is watching? The answer needs to be… whatever Jesus did… *and* does.

And then our loving, thoughtful, caring Lord, will be quick to say to *us*, well done my good and faithful servant… Come away in and share my happiness! What a wonderful thought!