

Sermon for 2 before Advent , 16 November 2014
St James, Cambridge
The Revd. Geoffrey Howard

Lectionary Readings:

Zeph.1.7,12-end

Ps 90

1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

Matthew 25.14-30

Two years ago an audience at a Cambridge college enjoyed a rare musical treat. An 82 year old man made a musical *début* which evoked an ecstatic response. A feat even more remarkable in that he had hardly ever before touched the keys of a piano and indeed was regarded as musically ungifted. This morning that geriatric phenomenon stands before you, I am he. Let me give you something of the background to this unique occasion. Those of you who have heard Patrick Hemmerle play will know what a gifted pianist he is: he is also an inspired teacher – one of his pupils appeared on television a couple of months ago having reached the piano finals of the BBC Young Musician of the Year. Each July Patrick's pupils give a concert for their families and friends. Two years ago he surprised me by suggesting that I should play a duet with him. Clearly he had discerned deep within me, obscured by my shy and modest exterior, a gift of which even I was unaware, previously I had only played the first three notes of *Three Blind Mice* on my daughter's recorder, the fourth note always eluded me. Patrick said, *I've found just the piece, Martinu's Avec un doigt – With one finger*. The result was sensational, Patrick played the rather flashy twiddly bits, I the heavier more demanding part with only one finger. When the applause eventually subsided, I said, *If I can do this with one finger think what I can do with ten*. It is all on You tube.

An even more remarkable event is recorded by Orlando Figes in his cultural history of Russia. Apart from the Romanovs, the wealthiest family in Russia in the 18th and 19th centuries was the Sheremetevs. They owned more than a million serfs, several hundred of whom were selected each year to be trained as artists, actors, singers, chefs, musicians and so on. The family even had its own orchestras and sometimes a lack of skill was made up for by sheer numbers. On one occasion to save time on the training of players, each musician was taught just one note. The number of players depended on the number of notes in a piece, each had to play his one note at the appropriate time. And apparently they succeeded.

The Parable of the Talents is responsible for these musical musings . We are often tempted to divide humanity into one of two categories, the talented and the untalented. On one side a few golden boys and girls, the envied cream of the human race, the high fliers; on the other side are the multitudes of plodders, the leaden ones, untouched by any good fairy bearing glittering gifts. An important lesson this parable teaches is that this is a false division. There is no such creature as an untalented human being. Each has at least one talent. *To one he gave five, to another four, to another one*. You could say to one he gave ten fingers, to another one; to one he gave he gave a multitude of notes to another just one note.

But to each he gave something. God has a place in his orchestra for the one-fingered pianist and the one-note flautist. No-one is excluded from taking part in God's music-making - even the tone deaf ones like me.

Each group faces a different temptation. Pride is the temptation of the much-talented ones. I once said to a close relative of mine, *You are so talented*. And so she was. I didn't say it ironically, sarcastically, insincerely, or patronisingly. I meant it. I was startled by her response. It was as though I'd insulted her. She snarled back, *Talented! What is it to be talented?* I am still puzzled by

her reaction. Except that the more I think about it the more it seems she was saying something important, albeit in an unnecessarily unpleasant way. She was saying there is nothing to be proud of in being talented. A talent is not anything to boast about. We refer to much-talented people as *gifted* people. They have not earned their talents, nor have they merited them. They are a free gift. It is called grace. We sing:

And very virtue we possess And every victory won,

And every thought of holiness are his alone.

We could also sing, *and every talent we possess is his alone.*

Talent and self-conceit do not belong together..

The temptation of the modestly-talented is discouragement and withdrawal. With my modest gifts what can I offer when others can offer so much more? What is the widow's mite compared to the billionaire's cheque? Well we all know what our Lord thought of that mite and we all know what he thought of the one who refused to use his solitary talent.

This parable refers to the whole of life, not just our church-life. Nevertheless it does refer to our life in the Church and in this context I would love some Sunday morning to ask you all to write down on a slip of paper what it is that brought you into the Church, what it is that brought you into this specific church, St James, and, most important, what keeps you here. Perhaps the churchmanship, the quality of the worship, the excellent music, the children's work, the faithfulness of our parish priest, I am sure all these play a part; but I suspect the commonest answer would be the friendliness - that you felt welcomed here.

Many years ago Rita and I went to mass at the Cathedral of Christ the King in Liverpool. It was only the second Roman Catholic service I'd been to and the first time for Rita. We were apprehensive. Would we be detected as interlopers? Would they get at us? Two memories remain. The first is how informal it was, much less formal than in most Anglican cathedrals I imagine; the other memory is of the man at the door handing out the hymn books. A tough little man. probably a docker during the week, as he handed me my book he said with a smile as broad as his Scouse accent, *Sing up brother*. Immediately we felt at home, our nervousness vanished and a Roman service has held no fears for me ever since. I remember nothing of the celebrant, nothing of the preacher, the man who welcomed us at the door is indelibly printed on my memory.

I wonder how many have been converted to the faith, have become regular churchgoers because of those who have kept the door of the Lord's house? I'd like to think the sermon would appear somewhere on the answers to my questionnaire, but I suspect more often it would be the welcome you received; the person you sat next to; the warm exchange at the peace; the folk you talked to over coffee – all of them investing their talent for friendship.

God has given everyone of us at least one talent and the only way to keep it is to spend it. He has work in his kingdom for each of us. The only ones to lose their talent are those who try to hang on to it, cling to it, are afraid to use it, protect it, hide it in the dark, under the earth or under a bushel. The ones who keep and multiply their talents are the ones who spend them and themselves. God has a piano ready and waiting for us one-fingered pianists, he has an orchestra for those who can only play one note. And the music they produce is heavenly.