

## SERMON FOR 2nd SUNDAY BEFORE ADVENT | 19.11.17

One of the great celebrations of the year are the National Bravery awards for children. They highlight the actions of a remarkable bunch of children and all their stories are different. Some save parents in serious medical conditions at home, some overcome extraordinary disabilities to take part in sport while others raise huge sums of money for charity. Quite rightly the Prime Minister of the day hands out the awards and commends their courage and their self-sacrifice.

And the lovely thing about these events is that no one stands in the wings carping. Everyone is fulsome in their pride and their delight in the achievement of others. There is something about children that stops all the envy.

Today's Gospel is not easy. Especially the phrase *for those who have, more will be given*. Exactly, we say to ourselves. Isn't it so often the case that those who are richer and brighter and better looking always seem to have yet more fame and fortune heaped on their shoulders? It is very much easier being successful if you have lots of support from your family, a good education and a roof over your head. It isn't so difficult making big profits if you already have a lot of money to start with. Five easily converts to five more, two to two more.

But what about the one who has very little, the one who is actually terrified about losing what little he has. We can hear the tremor in his voice as the third slave says *Master, I knew you were a harsh man reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter*. The guy is so terrified of making a mistake that the only solution is to at least make sure he doesn't lose the one talent he was given.

In our society where success is judged by our ability to play the numbers game, the third slave stands alongside millions and millions of ordinary people who always start off with a massive disadvantage: no one trained them to take risks; no one told them that it was better to fail than not to have tried. It is as if they were born to fail.

This Gospel could easily be set today, and in any big city you care to mention. And it sounds as if Jesus is colluding with it. He calls the servant wicked and lazy.

But let's step back a bit.

**On Friday morning I had a meeting with Maggie McMahon, one of the Diocesan safe-guarding team. And she was reflecting on the way the care of the vulnerable has changed in the churches over the last ten years. In the past, clergy like me were very much on our own, trying to sort really quite difficult situations. In my last parish for example, I and the PCC at St Martin's had been trying to do our utmost to help a repeated sex offender. Despite all the difficulties, we got him the best help we could through the Lucy Faithful Foundation. I personally took him down to Epsom to be properly assessed, putting him up in the process. Several key members of the congregation formed a support group for him so that he could stay a member of the congregation. A very stringent contract was written so that he was never alone in the premises. He was allowed to play the organ but he was always chaperoned. As you can appreciate it was a huge undertaking for our small parish but we believed, together as a congregation – including those with children – that it was the Christ-like thing to do.**

**Sadly, it didn't work out: eighteen months later he returned to alcohol abuse and was so drunk at a weekday evening Mass that I had no alternative but to ask him to leave and to withdraw his permission to play the organ. Six months later he was discovered dead, in a flat that did not belong to him. As you might expect, we were devastated. But we believed we had done our best.**

**So it was something of nasty shock to hear that word had got round, here in London, that I had 'recklessly employed a well-known sex offender, and that I myself was therefore suspect'. I cannot tell you what a shock this has been.**

**Fortunately my hour and a half with Maggie on Friday sorted the case out and I was completely exonerated. Thanks to the Diocese this review has been sent on to the local authority so that anyone who needs to know will be properly informed.**

**But the key to the lingering doubts, according to Maggie McMahon was because, while we had done all we could to assist this young man, we had done it despite the warnings from the West Yorkshire Police who said that we should not help him in any way. We had not taken their advice - and it looked like we were now paying price.**

**And her advice was simple: you are never alone in these things. There is a Diocesan safeguarding team which can and will support you – something that was much less evident fourteen years ago.**

**While this was welcome news, the path we took all those years ago was not based on a refusal to work with others but on an objective decision that the advice we were receiving from heavy-weights within the police was not the right way to proceed.**

**We had to overcome our fear of being isolated from the ‘powers that be’, even if we felt less than qualified to do so. But we were reassured that God was with us and he didn’t want us to fail even if we didn’t have as many resources as the next person. In life we have what we have and the cause of failure is not what we have - but our fear of what will happen if we lose the courage of our convictions.**

**Sadly, it could be said that we did fail this organist. He died, in unknown circumstances, at the age of just 26, despite all that we had tried to do for him. He was a talented musician – we have sung one of his anthems here at St James’ – but he was also extremely weak and ultimately neither the Lucy Faithful Foundation nor us were able to overcome the addictions that dominated his life. But we tried.**

**Yet such efforts have been willfully misunderstood. Nor has anyone come to me and asked for my side the story. Instead I have become tainted with innuendo which I do not deserve.**

**Now I don’t, for one minute, think of what we did in Bradford as either brave or heroic. But, then as now, we did what we could in ways which we believed were rooted in the love of God.**

**The French priest Jean Vanier, founder of the mixed L’Arche communities of the able bodied and those with learning difficulties, wrote recently that there are two realities, two cultures. *There is the culture of power and there is the culture of relationships. The men and women I live with, see that the best thing in life is to be together. We can’t solve all the world’s problems but we have learned this: that the aim in life is not to be independent, it is to have friends. People belong together in a shared life.***

**That means those with one talent not envying the one with two; or the one with two talents envying the one with five. Instead, Vanier teaches us to value every contribution, large or small. And he gave an interesting – if politically difficult - example. *What would we say to the proposal that those with learning difficulties who wanted to work could do so – but we wouldn't pay them the minimum wage? I know there would be outrage because it would be seen to be demeaning this new work force. Yet perhaps what they would be bringing was not economic value but laughter. Everyone would be happier. It won't happen of course but wouldn't it be brilliant if it did?***

**In our small way we tried to value the talents of our organist even if that put us at odds with society at large.**

**And instead of bemoaning what we did, I have tried to hold on to Vanier's words: *Instead of seeing failure as loss, when will we learn to see everything as a gift that we can use? Those I live with have taught me not to be envious or furious with the inequalities of life, but to see beauty in every living person, however many talents they may or may not have.***

**In a world where power and relationships seem to be set against one another, and where those with most talent are heard above the rest, I hope we in the Church will always take the risk of looking after those with less – giving them the courage to overcome their fear of failure and helping them to use whatever gifts they have been given.**

**There is no beauty in a buried talent.**