

The Good Life
33rd Sunday, Year A
Matthew 25: 14-30
13 November 2011

This year's election campaign has got off to a lack lustre start, but all its contestation points revolve around a common theme. Take for instance the argument about raising the retirement age. When pensions first came in most people only lived a few years after 65. Now most people live on for decades after that, with retirement having the potential to be the most satisfying time of your life, if you have managed things well.

There is a concealed political dilemma in that which politicians don't want to talk about. Medical interventions are increasingly effective and expensive. In an age in which new hips and new knees have become routine, in which doctors can help us to live on for a long time, the truth is that there isn't enough money to afford all that the electorate wants done for them. Hard political choices have to be made about rationing these life enhancing possibilities, and whatever choices are made they are bound to be unpopular with those who miss out as a result.

Then there is benefit reform, always a popular theme with middle class voters. When a wealth transfer system was first brought in it was to help people through a temporary difficult patch in their lives. It wasn't envisaged that a significant proportion of the population would be on a benefit for most of their lives. Just how different things can be came home to me in Spain this year where, with 21% unemployment, only some jobs carry with them the right to an unemployment benefit, and even then you only get it for a year - after that you are on your own.

The truth is that we have a good life here, and what this election is about, and what all the other elections were about, is protecting and extending that good life. Harold Macmillan famously told the British electorate in the late 1950's, "You never had it so good," and really he had defined the political agenda for most western democracies thereafter.

But the good life isn't just the fruit of political decisions. To take two examples - our supermarkets give us the possibility of buying a wide range of foodstuffs regardless of whether they are seasonally available. And our amazing music reproduction technologies enable even those living on modest means to access the complete range of the world's best music. We can eat a variety of exotic food, and listen to a range and quality of music that even the emperors of the ancient world could never dream of.

This good life is both a cause for daily thanksgiving to God, and an opportunity for personal generosity to others. But it has the downside of insulating us off from considering the possibility that there is another world with even richer possibilities, which is our true home and ultimate destiny. I think that is even truer of our secularised contemporaries who are so entranced with our present good life that they are completely absorbed in it, and can't see the God behind it and within it.

But we won't be in danger of losing our perspective in that way if we attend to the Sunday readings which are steadily focussed on the what comes next agenda as we approach the season of Advent. The Christians at Thessalonica are so interested in God's future world that they want to know when it is coming. Paul instead directs them to the how that will happen, and echoes the Matthew theme that no-one but the Father knows the date and time, and that constant vigilance is the appropriate getting ready attitude.

Today's fascinating parable of the talents could be sub-titled the investment brokers charter. No doubt there will be many sermons preached today about using our God given talents to the full, and about making wise decisions about this world's wealth. But this moralising approach misses the point that Jesus tells this story in the context of his teaching about the end of this world. The high dividend yield strategy he is advocating relates not to the stock exchange, but to the life of the world to come. Yes, every one of us should come to a sober estimate of whether we are a one-talent person, a two-talent person, or a five-talent person. But the question is will we and can we deploy these talents in such a way as to take our place in that zone of God's future fulfilled purposes, and so come to know the life that really is life.

There is a tremendous difference between the good life as we know it now, and the even better life that will be in the Kingdom. Deploying our talents in the Matthew sense involves building a bridge between these two worlds in a three-step process whereby something of that future world starts to happen in our present experience. These three steps are the building blocks on which we are drawn in to union with God.

First, there is dying to sin. We can't be ready for life with God in a future perfect world unless we have defeated evil; in all the attractive and deceptive forms it presents itself to us. We are often the authors of our own unhappiness, and while our folly, sloth or foolishness may be the cause of that, these personal vulnerabilities are infused with and fuelled by the lurking influence of evil that is everywhere. This worm in the apple is what so often undermines the good life offered by the political promises of election time. Evil is a theological reality with political and social consequences. Social planning and self-help

ethical improvement won't defeat it. We have to claim the world-changing reality of Christ's death on the cross for ourselves if we are to give old Nick the flick.

Second, there is moral transformation. Having stepped in to the zone of liberation that Christ offers through his saving death, we have to gain and consolidate the ground by wrestling with temptation, and by developing the good habits that make us good people. There is a compulsiveness about sin that makes us go back to it even though we know how unrewarding it is. We must break that recurring pattern. God's grace motivates us and illuminates us in how to do that, but we must exert the will power and the energy to make it happen. Only by moral transformation do we become worthy citizens of the heavenly city.

Lastly, there is eschatological transformation, by which I mean that the powers of the age to come break in to our present situation in such a way as to remake us as our true selves. The forces of sin and evil fragment us to the point where we barely know who we are. The forces of the future heavenly country draw us together into a unified whole. They make Jesus present to us, in such a way as to remake us after his pattern. He is the truest human being who ever lived. As his put together again brothers and sisters we are ready for the glory to come.

This future world promised in the Advent hope is not something utterly different from the world we know now. It was there as a latent promise and as a seed in nuce within the creation from the beginning. I will leave the last word to David Bentley Hart:

The Christian should see two realities at once, one world (as it were) within another: one the world as we know it, in all its beauty and terror, grandeur and dreariness, delight and anguish; and the other the world in its first and ultimate truth, not simply "nature" but "creation," an endless sea of glory, radiant with the beauty of God in every part, innocent of all violence.