

READINGS

Zephaniah 1; 7,12-18

⁷ Be silent before the Lord GOD!

For the day of the LORD is at hand;
the LORD has prepared a sacrifice,
he has consecrated his guests.

¹² At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the people
who rest complacently on their dregs,
those who say in their hearts,
"The LORD will not do good,
nor will he do harm."

¹³ Their wealth shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.
Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them.

The Great Day of the LORD

¹⁴ The great day of the LORD is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter,
the warrior cries aloud there.

¹⁵ That day will be a day of wrath,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,

a day of clouds and thick darkness,
¹⁶ a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

¹⁷ I will bring such distress upon people
that they shall walk like the blind;
because they have sinned against the LORD,
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.

¹⁸ Neither their silver nor their gold
will be able to save them
on the day of the LORD's wrath;
in the fire of his passion

the whole earth shall be consumed;
for a full, a terrible end
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

Matthew 25: 14-30.

¹⁴ “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

THE DANGER OF COMPLACENCY

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard once told a story about a wounded goose who came in to land in a farmyard full of chickens. He stayed there until he healed, playing and eating with the chickens until, after a while, he even began to think he, too, was a chicken.

Then one day a flock of geese passed over the farmyard on their migratory path to warmer climes. The goose heard their honking and looked up. And as he did so, inside him something stirred and his wings began flapping. He rose a few feet in the air, but then stopped in mid-air and settled back once again into the mud of the farmyard. He had become complacent and settled for a lesser life.

Today’s readings both address the danger of complacency and settling for less. In our Old Testament reading, the Prophet Zephaniah warns the southern tribes of Judah about complacency in colourful language designed to terrify.

This prophecy was written in the 7th century BC after the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians. Having come through unscathed, the peoples of the southern kingdom grew complacent and continued to live in way that angered God. But Zephaniah made clear to them in no uncertain term that they could not presume that, just because they escaped the Babylonian attacks, they would ultimately escape God's judgement.

He warns them that 'the Day of the Lord (or judgement) is at hand', and that God would 'search the city of Jerusalem with lamps' and 'punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs' - which in some translations reads as 'those who settled on their lees'. The dregs, or the lees, are the particles that settle during fermentation which, if left too long, ruin a wine. So what he is saying is that, rather like the goose who settled in the mud of the farmyard, the peoples of Judah were settling for less.

And the Bible says that this complacency angers God. Zephaniah points out in quite terrifying language that Day of the Lord will be a day of 'wrath' when the Lord will bring 'such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind because they have sinned against the Lord, their blood shall be poured out like dust and their flesh like dung'. It's a pretty graphic warning. And the danger of complacency is just as great in 21st century western societies as it was in Judah in the 7th century B.C.

The Chambers English dictionary defines complacency as 'a willingness to too easily settle', being 'too easily satisfied' as well as being 'self-satisfied; smug, disinclined to worry'. Complacency is about living as if God doesn't exist or as if there are no consequences for our actions; excusing our behaviour by saying to ourselves - 'it's okay, it doesn't matter, "the LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm."' In effect it is 'practical atheism' - which is why complacency is so offensive to God.

This theme is also picked up in today's New Testament reading from the gospel of Matthew. In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus likened God to a master who entrusts property to his servants while he is on a journey. To the first servant he gave five talents, to the second he gave two talents and to the third he gave one talent (the equivalent of about one million pounds in today's currency). The first two servants traded with their talents and so increased their masters yield, while the third simply buried it in the ground and left it there.

On his return the master rewarded those who proactively sought to increase their master's wealth, calling them his good and trusty servants. But the third servant who settled for less, he castigated as 'wicked and lazy' telling him at the very least he should have invested his money with the bankers in order to earn interest.

This parable is about stewardship of God's gifts to us, and our responsibility to use them well to further his Kingdom. Which is why Jesus concludes his parable with the worthless or complacent slave being thrown 'out into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Complacency risks God's wrath or anger. We don't like dwelling on God's wrath in the twenty first century. We prefer to focus on his love, forgiveness and mercy as personified by Jesus, and we often like to think the God of 'wrath' is confined to the Old Testament. But what Jesus makes clear in this parable is that God is all loving but can also be moved to righteous anger by the sins of his creation.

But what does this mean for us?

It means that, as Christians, we need to live in awareness that God has given us great blessings and that he wants us to actively seek to use these blessing for his glory. What the Parable of the Talents

makes clear it isn't enough to be content that we have been saved, we are called to use all that God has given us for the sake of the Kingdom. And we mustn't waste the opportunities that God gives us to witness to him - whether it be sharing our faith or by the way we live, loving our neighbours as ourselves.

God wants us to do far more than to passively preserve what he has entrusted to us, we mustn't just rest on our laurels and become complacent. Because the blessings that he has given us – like the money given to the servants – are not ours to own. We are to shake off any complacency and be proactive disciples. God gives us to us extravagantly through the power of the Holy Spirit, but with great power comes great responsibility.

So we need to ask ourselves today:

Are there any areas of our lives in which we are being complacent?

Are we in danger of settling for less and living as if God is an absent landlord?

And confess these to the Lord asking for his help to be his 'good and faithful' servants.