

"The kingdom of heaven is as if…."

… And Jesus tells us a story of a man, and three slaves.

I wonder, if you think about those four people – the wealthy landowner, and the three slaves - which you instinctively thought of as God? Where are you seeing the kingdom in this reading?

It's a tempting thing – and revealing, really, on how we think about God – to always cast God as the one in the story with the most worldly power. But … here's a description of that man in this reading….

A harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed. A man who calls a slave who returned his money to him "worthless" and throws him "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"

God is love[1], assures S. John in our scriptures. Is this a picture of love?

But *God **is** love*. … insists S. John, and he continues… *There is no fear in love*[2].

"I was afraid", said the third servant. Afraid of what? Afraid of the master. Afraid of his angers, of having not done the right thing. And because he was afraid, he has held back. Buried the money he was given, and kept his head down – and there might be several reasons for that, if you think about it.

Today is Safeguarding Sunday – and perhaps you're starting to see why, when I looked at the reading – I said 'oh… there's a lot in that'. I'm just going to leave that thought there in your mind now, whilst I continue.

When the master returns, and is angry, the third slave has a choice. Does he hide? Does he just take the punishment in silence, with the master's capricious angers? …. No, he does not. He challenges the master.

When the third servant challenges the master, the response is interesting. It's classic gaslighting, really. He does not deny the accusations – he makes the problem the

[1] 1 John 4 :16
[2] 1 John 4: 18

fault of the servant. He reminds the servant that if he knew what he was like… he should have worked harder!

So… I'm suggesting the master is exploitative, and what's more I'm going to suggest he is corrupt…

- He is handing out talents. A talent was a lot of money. (About 6000 times a day's wage). The question is - how does he become this wealthy? Was it earnt honestly? Certainly, there is huge disparity of wealth and power here, allied to a distinct lack of kindness and generosity. And yet he still reaps and harvests crops that he has not sown.

Also, the third servant is chastised for not at least investing the talent in the bank and earning interest – BUT Jewish law prohibits the gaining and charging of interest – specifically because it creates more disparity, cycles of debt, and kills generosity. This would have been a massive flag to Jesus' audience that this was not the Good Guy of the story.

So, we have a master who is lashing out in anger, embracing devious means to wealth, and one who says those who co-operate in exploitation will be rewarded? This (as the children's books say) is Not My God!

Sometimes, safeguarding is about learning to see. Our own perceptions, prejudices, contextual expectations, other people's persuasive powers, can all lead us to miss what is under our nose. Especially in familiar places, and with familiar or powerful people.

So … who is God in this story? Jesus calls himself the Servant King. And walks with us wherever we find the poor, the oppressed, the abused. And there's a clue. I suggest we find God, in fact, in and with the servants in this story. We see the first and second servants seeking survival and trying to make best of the situation, and being drawn deeper and higher into this master's organisation. We might see conditioning or grooming or simple fear here. I am not condoning or justifying the situation they find themselves in – but it's all too common an abusive situation. Perhaps they see no alternative, perhaps if they try to stand against it, they might be left with accusations of consent and burdens of shame. We see Jesus standing with them, as he stood at the Cross, and the breakfast on the beach, and with all who are caught up and confused in greater powers of violence and pain.

And the third servant? He is afraid, but holds some deeply rooted inner truth. It might remind you of Jesus' fear in the garden of Gethsemane, but his deep conviction that carries him through.

This servant overcomes his fear, to call out injustice and challenge oppression, in non-violent protest.

And …. he becomes the one who is thrown out into the outer darkness.

This happens in our world, doesn't it. But when standing up for justice and breaking free of oppression brings tears and pain, and darkness – we find Jesus there too. In our Good Fridays of darkness and pain. And in our Easter Days.

The Lord who brings life out of brokenness, and hope from despair. Who says every single soul is worth dying for, and every voice is worth hearing, and every life is worth living to the full.

(And that, actually, applies to both the master and the servants, in the fullness of time, for Jesus promises us that *all* are included in his just mercy. *None shall be lost*[3], he says.)

Jesus speaks to us from the place of the Servant King on this Safeguarding Sunday. Telling us we are never alone, even in the darkest places, and that in his strength and grace we can find courage to speak out, to treasure human dignity, and to enable everyone to grow into the gifts which are entrusted to us.

And that … that leads us to another true reading of this story (for in God many things can be true at once, and brought together in blessing) – about the use of talents – about using the courage, the truth, the love, the giftings that are entrusted to us, for our own flourishing and for the flourishing of those around us. For this, too, is safeguarding – not just to keep each other safe, but to help each other flourish!

How do we express the grace and mercy we are given? – Jesus is talking to other people of faith in this reading – and he is to us today - we have the Law, the Prophets, his Wisdom, he reminds us …. and what have we done with them? Are we complacent? Are we un-seeing? Are we afraid?

We have come so far as communities and churches. And we shall continue to build. Jesus challenges us today to see carefully. And then invites us to make ourselves part

[3] John 18: 9

of God's healing love in the world, in his mission to *bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and to set the prisoners free*[4].

And in this we can find hope… and indeed holy joy. (For our resurrection faith leads us always to joy and life.) In sharing safe space, and space where all can live life to its fullest… we share in God's creative and redeeming power - that everyone can flourish, can grow to be the people that they were meant to be.

This is a hill worth dying on – (like the one without a city wall[5]) – and a banner we can get behind (as the scriptures say – *the banner over us is love*[6]).

So, as S. Paul says to us today – let us together put on "*the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. [and]… encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing"*

Amen

[4] Isaiah 61: 1
[5] Golgotha – the hill where Jesus was crucified (the quote there from the hymn *There is a green hill far away without a city wall, where the dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all*)
[6] Song of Solomon 2: 4