

**SERMON FOR THIRY-THIRD SUNDAY
IN ORDINARY TIME 19.11.17**

ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD

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There is a strange thing that happens when one becomes a preacher. You are in a sense ruined for the task of spontaneous speech making. I often find that when it comes time to saying goodbye and thanking people I just don't have the words to express how I really feel.

This has happened to me a few times over the past few years. When it comes time to saying good bye and thanking people I often walk away feeling that somehow what I have said was inadequate.

I think that is one of the reasons why I love poetry. Poetry has a magnificent way of expressing ones inner world in a focused and deliberate way. It is also of the reasons why I am jealous of good musicians, because they know a poetic language of expression many of us wish we could obtain.

The medium of art – which is what music and poetry are, is one of the greatest gifts of God, it allows us to delve deep into the human psyche and express our inner world.

Our Christian tradition has beautiful art. Our scriptures, our writings, our artwork, our liturgy, our music. We are a church endowed with such precious and ancient gifts, gifts which express the most basic of human desires – the desire to be loved.

We believe that God holds the answer to that deepest desire in a way that nothing else does.

But what has happened so often in our tradition, is that the desire for love has always become coupled with another desire which drives the human condition, that of fear.

We are afraid to love and afraid to be loved. This fear is driven by our inadequacies, an inner voice that warns us of the risk of love.

This fear is always going to be present when we are involved in something new. It is the fear of the unknown, the fear that one will be accepted for who one is, a fear of taking the risk in loving those whom one finds themselves in relationship with.

Our minds like to create how others will perceive us, and often this perception is

created on the basis of our past experiences. And what is needed to remedy this perception is nothing more than the work of God. A work that begins a reorientation of our perceptions of others and of ourselves.

Today's Gospel in fact, is full of these very themes: Love, risk, and perception. We have a parable of Jesus that is one of the more longer and detailed of his teachings.

In it a man goes on a journey and leaves his slaves each with an exorbitant amount of money – equivalent to around 15 years average pay for only one 'talent' alone.

When the master leaves, each slave does something with the money entrusted to him. The first went off and traded it and doubled his money. The second one did the same –

doubling his money too. The third however dug a hole and buried his master's money.

We are told that time passes and on the return of the master he asks his slaves to settle their accounts. The first two are commended for taking the risk and putting the money to work, earning them the praise of the master and the opportunity to enter into his joy.

The third slave however receives an all together different response from the master.

He is told he is lazy and wicked and has no place with the master. The reason: he presumed the master was a ruthless person, as he states "I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid."

His fear drove him to neglect what the master had given him, and in the end he ends up with nothing.

For me the parable focuses not so much on the talents as about the third slave, the master, and the relationship between them.

And as we look at that relationship we get an acute insight into what Jesus is trying to convey in this teaching.

Firstly we notice from the outset that far from being harsh, the master acts generously, trusting even the third slave with the wealth of more than fifteen year's wages.

So there is an initial generosity offered to all of the slaves. But where the third slave differs, is simply that he creates in his mind this notion that the master is a harsh man.

And what we see is a great paradox at work – The emotion that drives the third slave in fact creates the conditions that lead to his downfall; fearing his master, that which he fears is realized. Perhaps then, the God we face is often the one we imagine.

In other words, our perception of God can create the very conditions in which we find ourselves. For the third slave he was so driven by fear that he didn't take any risk, and ended up with nothing.

And so the emotion that the passage invokes in us the listener – fear that our own experience includes the possibility that we too will be rejected by the master, is the very emotion that the passage calls us to resist.

Fear of God can be a crippling experience. And it is all to do with the fear of love. The fear that if God cannot love us unconditionally, then who else would? This fear can in fact stop us from taking the risk of loving others and our selves.

I know from my experience, I have had to take risks; that is what pastoral ministry is all about. We have to love in order to be loved in turn. And it is in this risk that we in fact find freedom, acceptance and our true selves. Our gift to others is our unconditional love which has allows us to love in return.

And so what our experiences and the experience of today's Gospel tells us is that the greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to

give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all it turns out is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently. To not allow oneself to be open to love – and its joys but also its pain.

Because what is so scary about love is that there is always the risk that it will fail you, it will let you down and it can hurt you. And we all do that when we enter into love. I know that I may have hurt many of you when I failed to love you as I should. I can only ask that you will forgive me, as we together acknowledge we can never live up to the ideal of love – the love of God.

And for us this is none other than the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate risk taker; the one who resists fear and conquers it. He left his safely rural life in Galilee to go to

Jerusalem, the capital city, where the religious authorities would regard him as a threat, and the Romans would surely regard him as a disturber of the peace.

If he is the one that we draw strength from, the one who inspires us to love, then I feel that our love for each other will always be risky, making us vulnerable to love and all its conditions. Love is what binds us, and when all is said and done, this love is all that remains.

So thank you for taking the risk in loving me, and may it be the same risk we all take in loving God, “for this is love: not that we loved God, but that he first loved us.” May you all know that love.

As I mentioned earlier in my sermon I love poetry and its power to convey our inner world, and ultimately its power to convey love.

A blessing, from the poet W. H. Auden:

**And may the Ancient of Days
Provide for all you must do
His invisible guidance,
Lifting up, dear, upon you
The light of His countenance.**

Amen