

4th October, 2015.

Reading: Matthew 25: 14 - 30

Sermon: Stewardship

It's amazing the things you come across when you packing up to move house, things which have been staring you in the face for years and which you couldn't see for all the other rubbish which was surrounding them.

If there is ever a power cut, I have discovered I have enough candles to light up the whole of Lochgilphead. I could also probably give most of the congregation a cuppa if you all arrived at the door at the same time. There is something of a glut of mugs.

However, every now and again, I come across something useful. One of the things I came across was something I thought I should just dump as I have probably never used it but if I have, it was a very long time ago. However, me being me, I packed it and took it home.

It was a small folder entitled Christian Stewardship Manual and it was provided by the Church of Scotland in 1991. That was the year before I was ordained and Inducted to my first charge and it is still in perfect condition, like so many other things on my bookshelves! Maybe that will change. We'll see. I'm full of good intentions!

There was a Vocabulary Quiz on Facebook the other night and the advert for it said something like: Let us see if we can work out how old you are from the vocabulary you use. There were about ten questions which you had to answer and then it worked out your age. They reckoned I

was about 68! I was not impressed, I have to say! I don't really think of my vocabulary as being particularly dated but then there are so many new words which have been incorporated into the English that I suppose some of the words I use will be dated to those of younger generations.

Anyway, 'stewardship' is one of those words which is really dated and although familiar enough in Biblical times, it is fairly unfamiliar in the modern world. Nowadays, if you mention the word stewardship, people in Church will immediately think that the Church is about to organise a campaign to raise money and if you use the word 'steward' in other company, a certain part of society will think of the people who are employed on ocean-going liners or in certain clubs and institutions.

But what is a steward? As it says in the Manual, in Biblical times, every reasonably well off householder had a steward to manage his household affairs, his property, his farm, his accounts and his slaves. The best known example from the Bible was Joseph who was the steward in Potiphar's household. Joseph, as we know, wielded considerable power and influence. In New Testament times, again, the steward was in charge of household affairs.

When we remember that one of the descriptions of the Church in the New Testament is as the household of God, it is easy to see why in the New Testament, Christian people are also described as God's stewards. As God's stewards, we are entrusted with certain 'goods' by God, who is the head of the household, and not for our own good but for the blessing of the household as a whole.

The parable which we read this morning, the parable of the talents or bags of gold, as it is called in the NIV, illustrates the Christian's responsibility to use the opportunities, gifts and possessions which God has given him or her.

There is a similar parable in Luke 19, the parable of the ten pounds, and it makes the same point. Use what you're given or lose it.

So far, stewardship has concentrated on money and possessions but there is another aspect to stewardship. At the end of the creation story, in the opening chapters of Genesis, man is made responsible for cultivating the earth.

We, as God's people, are charged with caring for creation and that is a stewardship responsibility which remains unchanged and yet look at the damage we do to our planet with chemicals and with pollution of land and sea and air. Look at the damage we do with warfare resulting in displaced peoples. Look at the damage we do with deforestation. Look at the damage we do to the habitats of wildlife. The list goes on. We not only harm the planet but all life on the planet.

I'm even tempted to say look at the potential damage we cause by interfering on planets which have nothing to do with us. 'Let's see if there is life on Mars', say the scientists. 'Yes, why not.' We may as well transmit disease from our planet to where there may potentially be some other form of life which won't cope with what comes from our atmosphere but that's ok because it's all in the name of science. We have a right to go wherever we want and to do

whatever we want to satisfy our curiosity. Do we really? We are charged with the care of the planet which provides for all our needs and yet we exploit it for our own gain.

As we turn to the New Testament, we see that there is another aspect to stewardship. In 1 Corinthians, Paul, for example, emphasises that we are called to be stewards of the gospel, stewards of God's secret truths and he goes on to say, in chapter 4, that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

What do we do with the gospel? Do we share the love that has been given to us, shown to us by God or do we take it and keep it to ourselves or only share it with those we like? What do we do with the message which comes from Jesus that He is the way, the truth and the life and that no one comes to the Father but by Him? Do we keep that to ourselves as well or do we look for ways of passing on that message to others for the sake of the whole household of God?

In 1 Peter, in chapter 4, Peter says: Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God.

If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

The idea of stewardship is fundamental to Christian living. One of the first instructions which was given by Jesus to the first disciples was that they were to be witnesses to Him. Obeying that command is a matter of good stewardship. We are each servants or stewards called by God to manage the affairs of His household.

On this Harvest Thanksgiving Sunday, we need to take time to reflect on the use we make of the talents God has gifted us because the harvest of which the Bible speaks is greater than that which the farmers reap from their fields. It has to do with all of creation and with the kind of stewards we are of God's household. Do we use the talents which we have been given for the benefit of all?

What we do know is that householder doesn't leave us entirely to our own devices. He keeps watch over us and provides us with guidance and with strength to do what is required of us.

May we continue to reap the benefits for His kingdom by our dedication to God's service here in this place and beyond.