

## **MORNING SERVICE**

Sunday 18 April 2010, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

*2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Easter (Misericordia Domini)*

*preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff*

*hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)*

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### **Welcome & Intimations**

**Opening Hymn** : 'How blest are those who do not stray' (CH 1)

### **Children's Talk**

**Children's Hymn** : 'When I needed a neighbour' (CH 544)

### **Prayer & Lord's Prayer**

God, you live among us  
wherever people do good.  
We thank you for that simple fact  
and we praise your Name for it.  
We thank you for the simple things  
that make life true:  
the visit that we did not expect,  
the beautiful day that came unexpectedly,  
the test that worked out better than we hoped,  
the things that were not as bad as we feared.  
We thank you, O God, for simple things.  
God, in your mercy,  
HEAR OUR PRAYER.

And we pray, O God,  
for ourselves and for each other,  
for all the times we forget about this,  
the times we make life too complicated,  
because we want to have it all  
or just want to have more than we can,  
or only want to be better than others.  
God, in your mercy,  
HEAR OUR PRAYER.

And now as Jesus taught us, we pray:  
Our Father...  
...Amen.

*(Children leave for Sunday School)*

**Readings** : Ecclesiastes 7:14-20 & Matthew 25:14-30 & 25:34-40 (*Good News Bible*)  
(*Second Gospel reading read by a different voice*)

**Hymn** : 'There's a spirit in the air' (CH 616)

### **Sermon**

Being a school chaplain has its surprises. You can be asked to hand out certificates at the end of term. Certificates always designate some as 'the best'. Children are very proud to get a certificate. And I must say that teachers are very sensitive and diplomatic in making sure the anyone will get some kind of certificate some time.

We did not have prizes or certificates when I was in primary school. Had we, I might have won a certificate for flawlessly memorising the weekly Psalm verse, but that doesn't really make you the coolest guy on the block. For PE I would not even have got a booby prize, and for the rest there was nothing really in which I excelled. (Of course, I hope you find this unbelievable.) Actually, I am very much like anyone else, because there are always very few who are really good at something. And just being good at saying your Psalm verses will not boost your career.

Our society is glutted with competition and many people get literally sick of it. Competing is an effective way of getting the best out of yourself, but it can easily turn against you. Because most of the time there can only be one winner. But does that make all others losers? How do we think of ourselves?

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Now we read a well-known parable we have heard before. We also listened to another parable which Jesus said straight after that. When we read these parts from Matthew last year, I had it spread over two different Sundays. But if we read these parts together, the second makes a comment on the first. And, as we will see, that is very important.

The first parable is about the talents. We all know the usual explanation. That is: we all have to make the utmost of our gifts, and those who have the most gifts, will be the ones who get all the praise. If you happen to be the one with just that one talent – well, tough for you. You're out. The purpose of life is to be successful, because the Lord will bless his faithful.

This explanation can help to make us feel we are failures. Because we will never be good enough. There is always someone more generous, more idealistic, more honest. Others will always be smarter, prettier, faster, cooler, richer, more popular, and so on. And we, och, we're just the ones who fall behind.

As long as we keep comparing ourselves on that scale of 'who is the best', we will be bound to bury our one talent. We step out of the race, we grind our teeth, we cry a bit,

and we adapt to the daily treadmill, silently becoming its slaves. In the relentless race to be the best, many of us pull out, bury their one talent, bury themselves. Just to avoid feeling a failure.

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We read two parables today.

*Now once there were three slaves... one got five talents, the other two, and that one just one...*

And:

*Whatever you did to one of the least of these brothers-and-sisters of mine, you did to me...*

Two different parables.

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Just the other day a fellow preacher from Antwerp made me see the connection between these two portions.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes you read parts of the Bible again and again, and you don't really see what it says – and then suddenly the penny drops.

The parable of the talents does not tell what our Lord in heaven does, but how things go among our own earthly lords, the powers that be. The parable of the talents is actually a shocking story. This is what we do. The rich get richer, the poor get poorer. The ones who hide their treasure for fear of losing it, will lose it anyway. Those who have got many talents use it to get the better part of the cake. They get away with the bonuses, they know how to claim expenses. The parable shows us what happens if people are not yet made free by the Gospel of Easter. It tells us how things are when we still live the lives of slaves.

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Directly after this parable Jesus concludes his teachings – according to Matthew – with another parable. One which is totally opposed to the one of the talents. In the end, Jesus says, it will not be about who has been the best, but about how we have served each other.

*I was hungry and you fed me... I was a stranger and you received me in your homes... I was sick and you took care of me...*

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<sup>1</sup> In this case: thank you Bert Lodewijckx, from the congregation 'De Vleugel' in Antwerp. Lodewijckx refers to 'political exegesis' as the source of his wisdom, probably he means theology of liberation. The original address – in lovely Flemish-Dutch, and more concise than my sermon – can be found on-line: <http://www.devleugel.be/vieringen/toelichtingen/vieringen-2009-2010/103-100410-middelmatigheid>.

In the end it comes down to living a life of simplicity and solidarity. In such a life we make use of our talents as a means, not as a purpose. If we keep things simple, we have a bigger chance of being true and faithful. If we stand by each other, mutually, we will learn what justice truly is about.

Let's be clear: this is not a romantic life, hiding away in the countryside, unharmed by all evil in the bad world out there. Romantics only exist in books and films, and evil will find us anywhere. But to keep things simple and to stand up for justice are the things that keep us going.

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What kind of life is that? Well, if we do not strive to be the best, or at least excellent, our fate may seem to fall back on mediocrity. But then: so what? Why do we have this urge to always get more points than someone else? A bit of ambition, imagination or competition can help us to get going. But most of the time we are just average, mediocre, so-so.

To accept that as a fact of life is a liberating moment. Because it frees us from that horrible push to always be more and perform better than our neighbour. Actually it is quite an art to walk the middle in a helpful and healthy way. As Ecclesiastes says: *Don't be too good or too wise... but don't be too wicked or too foolish either...*

I can easily think too bad about myself. I misunderstand people, I don't do enough visits, I'm not as bright as I like to think, etcetera. And it's all true. On the other hand I can have very bright ideas about how great life could be, if only... If only people would listen to me, if only I could get things done my way. Both ways of thinking are unhelpful. Because they conceal reality. Reality is that I am usually somewhere in the middle. And it's a skill to accept that – and then make the best out of that real reality.

If we learn that skill, we can go on after our dreams were shattered. We can accept it if life is different than we wanted. We can remain faithful to the task and people that came on our path. Moreover, we will learn to be realistic about that one talent we have – and really use it to the best we can. If there is one thing we should teach our children – our grandchildren, nephews and nieces – it is this: dare to live in the middle and don't hide your single talent. If you have more talents, you'll find out soon enough, but don't envy others for that.

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We came to Kintyre, Nelleke and I. Indeed it is a nice place to live. Clean air, beautiful views, a lot of space, not too much stress, even the people are alright. But was it what we had always dreamt of? Not exactly. Our path led us here more or less by accident, even if we chose it ourselves.

We soon began to learn that under a friendly outside quite some human pain and grief can be buried. The nice pastoral picture of the contented farmer quietly tending his

flock is not a picture of real life. If a congregation tells you they want to look to the future that doesn't necessarily mean they all want to change. A friend who visited us said, 'Martin, where are you going to find your intellectual challenge around here?'

It's true: most of us just have that one talent. So have I. And often we are not sure what that talent exactly is. But remember that the blessing with which Jesus starts his teaching – according to Matthew – is about *the poor with Spirit, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers*.<sup>2</sup> They are all people with obviously just one talent.

We are blessed indeed, if we have one of these talents. I have seen them at work, right here. People do use their little talent. Some do bakings, some do their neighbour's shopping or bring them up and down to hospital, some visit the sick, some speak the right words, some voice injustice that needs to be addressed, some dare to share their dream of a better world, some create jobs. It all happens in Kintyre.

Blessed are we if we live with our single talent, not bothered about being average or mediocre. Blessed are we if we live to the full, sharing that talent with others. Blessed are we with or without our mediocrity.

Amen.

**Hymn** : 'Take this moment' (CH 501)

### **Offering and Dedication**

#### **Prayer of Intercession**

God of new life,  
in prayer we remember  
all the talents we can bring in.  
Even if we all have just one talent,  
together that might be a really big thing.  
We thank you for that,  
but we also ask that we may dare  
to make the most of it.  
God, in your mercy,  
HEAR OUR PRAYER.

In prayer we remember those  
who seem to have a great lack of talents:  
children and grown-ups with learning difficulties,  
workers who will never get that promotion,  
parents who struggle to raise their kids,  
people who just can't find the way to make their business flourish,  
families who never get out of poverty,  
young people who are trapped in petty crime or worse.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:3-9, the Beatitudes.

We remember each of them,  
because they too are blessed,  
and they can very well be  
meek, merciful, pure in heart or peacemakers,  
God, in your mercy,  
HEAR OUR PRAYER.

In silence we remember those  
we know need us  
to remember them.  
*(silence)*

So we pray in the name of Jesus,  
who has blessed our one talent,  
and who even granted us more than that.  
Amen.

**Closing Hymn** : 'Longing for light' (CH 543)

**Blessing**