

## Reflection by David Kennedy: 23 October 2024

### Luke 12. 39-48

Jesus says, "But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he<sup>h</sup> would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>40</sup>You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

<sup>41</sup>Peter said, "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?" <sup>42</sup>And the Lord said, "Who, then, is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? <sup>43</sup>Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. <sup>44</sup>Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. <sup>45</sup>But if that slave says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, <sup>46</sup>the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful. <sup>47</sup>That slave who knew what his master wanted but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted will receive a severe beating. <sup>48</sup>But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required, and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."

That is a tough Gospel reading; the kind of passage that many preachers are tempted to pass over, and not meet it head-on. But it the Gospel set for today in the Church's Lectionary. Let me approach it this way.

What do you expect of your clergy? Well, most Christians might hope that their Bishops, priests and deacons should be people of prayer; have a pastoral heart; that they should have highest standards of integrity, honesty, and godliness? That they should be faithful preachers and teachers? That that they should work hard, and be fully committed to their vocation?

Now this morning's gospel uses language that is difficult for us: it talks of *slaves*; of being 'cut in pieces'; of receiving 'a severe beating' – this sits ill with our history regarding slavery and colonialism as well as physical, sexual and spiritual abuse.

So that is this passage about? We have to remember that ST Luke as well as recording words and deeds of Jesus, is also writing for his own hearers. It seems that Luke has the Church leaders of his day in view, writing some 50 years after the resurrection.

The passage is cast as a parable about the master and his servants. The master has left them – in fact, he’s been gone for a long time, but one day he will return – no-one knows when. The Church was having to come to terms with the fact that Jesus’ ‘Second Coming’ might not happen as quickly as was once hoped or expected.

So in the parable, in the interim before the return of the Master, he has placed what the text calls *managers* – an unfortunate word in the contemporary Church of England which seems so often uses quasi-secular management models at least in its central governance. These ‘managers’ are the ones in charge of the master’s servants or slaves.

So, what will happen when the master returns? Well, it seems that two groups are addressed. The first are those managers who *abuse* the Master’s servants and live ungodly, licentious lives. They, we are told, will be judged very severely; hence, the reference to being ‘cut in pieces’ and to ‘severe beating’ in the parable.

The second group seem less culpable – those who perhaps are not so devout or watchful or committed as they once were, possibly because years have passed and the Master has not returned; those who simply have gone off the boil – they, it seems, will be judged less severely.

So, difficult though this passage is, it concludes with a truth – to those who have been given much, well, much is expected. And to those who have been entrusted with Christ’s flock – then much is demanded.

These are big words. But while the main focus here is the managers – we might say in today terms, the clergy and ministers of the Church, there is also an expectation of all servants of Christ the Master – ordained and lay.

We are all called to be watchful and prayerful, to live out the teachings of Jesus; to shape our lives on his ethic of love, and to seek to serve others for his sake.

In other words, today’s gospel says to all of us – be true to your profession.

You, as God’s people, have every right to have the highest expectations of those of us who are ordained. And we have every right to expect faithful discipleship from you as members of the Church.

So let us encourage each other and pray for each other.