

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

19th November 2023

Matthew 25:14-30

WAITING ... IN SERVICE

‘It is an existential question, and how they respond says a lot about who they are and what they believe as they go forward’. I wonder if you recognise that phrase at all, ‘an existential question’. As I thought about it, it doesn’t seem to have been used so much in the last six months or so, but in the couple of years before that it was often trotted out by experts in the media. ‘How the party responds to this scandal is an existential question’. ‘Whether the team can bounce back from this defeat is an existential question for them’. ‘Why are they even here? That’s the existential question’. If you are shaking your head in puzzlement about what that means, I remember when I first heard this phrase it seemed to me like the kind of thing people come up with to say so the rest of us are amazed that they are so clever we can’t even understand them. Over time I assumed it had to do with why we are here; the purpose of organisations, or teams, even people, existing. This week I Googled it (and the beauty of the internet is that if you look hard enough you’ll find something that says what you want it to), and a definition of ‘existential’ I found is that it is made of two words; ‘existence’ and ‘essential’. So, it is about what is the meaning of life, the purpose of life, why are we here?

So, off the top then, how would you answer the existential question for yourself? Why are we here? Common answers would be, I am sure; to live well (however we define that), to be kind to others, to make the world a better place for those who follow, to enjoy life, to be successful and fulfilled in what we do. And, because this address is delivered in a church setting, we can add to worship, love, and serve God, and to love others as we love ourselves. Nothing wrong with any of those answers, as broad as they are. And as Christians we can possibly say that God gives us an answer to that question which those without faith may struggle with a bit more.

This week we have the second of three parables from Matthew 25 which Jesus first taught just days before His death. All three deal with the coming of God’s Kingdom, and with how we wait, serve, and love others in the time leading up to this happening. Last week I said that the first parable, the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids, put to each of us the question, ‘what kind of waiter are you?’ The second parable which we have here today, often called the Parable of the Talents, asks us the existential question; why are you here?

At first glance it is another parable which can seem a bit hard to understand, and even a bit unfair. The master goes away, for a considerable amount of time it seems, and leaves each

of his servants with money to take care of for him. All three are given different amounts, they are each gifted differently, because the master knows the ability of each one. But even though the third servant is only given half of what the second servant is left, and a fifth of the first servant's amount, for Jesus' original audience of this parable the amount he is left still represents several years' salary of what people earned then. When the master returns from his travels, the first two servants are praised and rewarded for doubling what they were entrusted with; they had taken a chance and actively worked to increase their master's wealth. But the third servant, who we could possibly relate to very well, he took the cautious approach, burying his money in the ground, so that while he wouldn't increase it, he wouldn't lose any either; he was happy for things to stay just as they are, with no risk or reward. Their actions showed whether they were willing to go out and serve the master with what they were given, or if they were selfishly happy to sit back and let things remain as they are. And when the master returned, that is what they were judged on.

It is easy in this parable to see God as the master and ourselves as the servants; given gifts, talents, material things, by Him to use until He returns again. But the question is, and one we perhaps find a bit more confronting to answer, is which servant are we? I suggest that like with many parables in which there are multiple characters who we can associate ourselves with, in this parable at different times we can also see ourselves playing the role of each of these servants as we wait and serve in God's Kingdom.

The first two servants, remember, they took a risk. They used the gifts they had been given knowing that might not work out well for their master, but they did that. Have a think, when are we, when are you, like those servants. I am going to say that all of you, at plenty of times, are like that. Each person is gifted in different ways, so don't be hard on yourself in comparing what you do, what you give, how you serve, with others. What is really the existential question here, is about how we respond to God's love in how we live our lives, worship Him, treat others; is that done with a view to selfishly wanting to please ourselves, or to reach out and serve God and other people? Many times, either people tell me or I find out about ways all of you are doing exactly what is being praised here; lending a hand to someone in need, making contact with someone who needs support, providing what people may need, being involved in community groups which help others in various ways, as well as serving in different ways in our congregation. For all the ways that we see and know of people doing these things, there are many more we don't know. The master knew what each servant could do, so each was gifted differently. It is the same with us. Don't judge yourself, or judge others, on the basis of unfair assumptions or in comparison with others. This parable is meant to be a

mirror for us to have a look at ourselves, not a microscope for us to judge and compare the actions and attitudes of others.

And then, the third servant, I'm sure many of us can think of times we act in that way; selfish, just wanting things to stay the same as we like them to be, not wanting to move out of our comfort zone. At the beginning when I asked 'why are we here', one answer is to enjoy ourselves and the things we have, and there is nothing wrong with that. The call from this parable is not to live life in a way which deprives us of all enjoyment, not enjoying the good gifts God has given us. Back in the great days of the Roman Republic, a bit before Jesus' birth and in the time of Julius Ceasar, there was a Roman senator by the name of Cato, who as a follower of stoic philosophy was a person of great integrity, but who divorced his wife who he deeply loved because being married to her was giving him too much pleasure in life. Sometimes as Christians we can maybe have a bit of that attitude. To serve faithfully and selflessly is not to deprive ourselves of enjoyment from all God gives us in our life.

What did the third servant do? He buried the gift he was entrusted with in the ground. Selfishly he was happier for things to stay as they were, rather than stepping out and taking a risk with what change might bring. Again, I can relate to that, and perhaps you can also. In our life: if I help out in that way will I have enough time left for myself? If I give to that cause will I have enough money left for what I want to do? If I talk to that person, or offer to help out, will I end up feeling awkward and uncomfortable? Do we bury the gifts we are given, or do we use them in stepping out for God?

In our church families, our congregations, this is a real question, and an absolutely existential one in relation to this parable: why are we here? To please ourselves and make ourselves comfortable, which is ok and a part of it, or to ultimately be a part of growing God's Kingdom in this world, which means stepping out with what we are given? Not long ago in our Lutheran churches we were pretty closed except to those with German names and ancestry. Fortunately, that has changed now, even to the point where the bishop of the Lutheran Church of Australia has the name Smith! But still, we can bury what God has given us, as a Christian community, to use in His service. It is ok to like the way we do things, the hymns and songs we are used to, to be with people we have known for a long time. But along side that we are also called, as the reason for our existence, to do what we can to reach out to others even when we would rather just close up and remain as we are. Here at St. Andrews we get a lot of baptisms; for various reasons, they just keep coming. Some come to us for baptism because they have been here for other baptisms with friends or family. Some are families from the school community who see us as their 'church'. A number come from the other end of the Gold

Coast because of what they have seen online or heard about us from others, and this is a Christian community they want to be associated with. They do not come because just by being baptised here gets them automatic entry in this College, that is not even a real thing. When they come, how do we view them? Do we bury our talents and think it would all be less complicated if we had less people passing through? Or are we willing to step out, to make them welcome, to pray for them both during the service and afterwards? One of our challenges is that we often see these families here and then either never again, or very occasionally. If you are thinking that, what are some ways, which you are willing to be a part of, that we can work on that? At a time when people are coming to churches less and less for things like funerals and weddings, isn't it a blessing that they still want to come to us to have their children baptised into God's family. How do we invest that gift God has given us so it can grow, rather than wanting to bury it because that is less uncomfortable for us?

Why are we here, as God's people, living this life in this world? This is the existential question which is put before us by this second Parable of the Kingdom here in Matthew 25. The answer Jesus gives us here, is that we are waiting ... in service, for God to come again, and called to do what we can with what we are given to grow His Kingdom. We are all gifted, we are all called. What is essential to our existence is that God created, saved, and loves each one of us, and now gifts and calls us to step out in faith and confidence to serve Him. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- What do you see as being the meaning of life, the purpose of your existence, why you are here? Is this something that has changed for you over the years, in different stages of your life?
- As a Christian do you think you look at this differently to someone who doesn't have faith? From this perspective, thinking also about what Jesus teaches us in this parable, what would you say is our purpose/role/calling as we live in this world? What are the ways you do carry this out? In what ways you are being called to not bury your gifts but to use them for God's Kingdom?
- As a member of any Christian group or community, how is God calling that congregation or group to carry out this work for the Kingdom? How does that congregation or group do this well? In what are ways are this congregation or group being called to not bury their gifts but to use them for God's Kingdom? How are you being called to be a part of this change of attitude?

Pray: thank God for all the gifts and abilities He has given to each one of us. Ask Him to help us to be faithful and unselfish workers for His Kingdom.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
19.11.2023*