Homily for Proper 28A

S. Stephen’s, Providence

15 November 2020

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, let me begin by saying

that as we approach the beginning of Advent,

and we hear once again the stern words of the prophets

warning of the day of wrath and time of judgment,

the words from Zephaniah we hear today perhaps sting just a little too much:

Though they build houses,  
    they shall not inhabit them;  
though they plant vineyards,  
    they shall not drink wine from them.”

As we once again face the prospect of being not able to inhabit this house,

and the inability to receive the Sacraments with regularity,

these words indeed hit a little too close to home this morning.

As you will have read in the e-news yesterday,

or will have now seen in the parish notes this morning,

today is the last day for several weeks that in-person worship

will be offered at S. Stephen’s.

This brings much sadness for those of us who have loved being back here.

But all is not lost, and I encourage you to not lose heart.

Though a pandemic is raging around the world,

God’s providence and God’s love remain a fact and are unchanged.

God is still King – a fact that we will celebrate next Sunday,

on the Feast of Christ the King.

Though in-person worship will not happen,

we will still live stream mass with music for those of you watching from home.

As we were all reminded back in March,

when we first suspended public worship,

the Church is not the building:

it is the mystical body of Christ,

comprised of its various members throughout the world,

of which we are all a part.

It does not cease to exist when we depart this building,

whether in normal times or in this time of COVID-19.

It continues as it ever did before.

As St. Paul exhorts us in the letter to the Thessalonians this morning,

we are to “encourage one another and build one another up,

just as you are doing.”

So keep doing that.

Meanwhile, we have a serious charge laid before us this morning

in our Gospel reading:

one which has much to say to us in this moment in our common life.

This morning we hear Jesus tell the parable of the talents,

in which servants of a prudent master are given vast sums of wealth to manage.

On the surface,

it may appear that this seems to portray a God

who rewards the rich and condemns the poor –

of course, we know that that is not the point of this parable,

for such an interpretation would be contrary to the entire message of the Gospels.

However, the Gospel reading must surely be a reassuring one

for members of our investment committee

and any bankers or economists among us.

And our lesson indeed is timely as we near the conclusion

of our Stewardship campaign;

for it causes us to think seriously about what it is to be good stewards

with that which has been entrusted to us,

and what it means to steward God’s wealth,

and the treasure that has been given to us.

Naturally, we know that what we have been given by God is not monetary in value,

nor does it consist of anything material.

The love of Christ which has been poured into our hearts

is what has been given to us –

a treasure of unknowable value and unsearchable worth.

As we are shown in our Gospel reading,

this gift, given to us at Baptism,

is not to be hoarded or kept to ourselves,

much as the familiar light under the bushel basket:

rather it is meant to be shared with others so that it grows and grows,

spreading abroad exponentially

as we make known the love and redemption won for us in Christ Jesus.

That is our charge from the moment we are baptized until the moment we die,

and are then paradoxically born unto eternal life.

None of us is free to shirk it off or assume someone else will bear the burden for us.

It is given to each of us,

to be nurtured and cultivated in the garden of our hearts –

hearts and souls which are called to be fertile ground

for that seed which is planted to take root within us,

until it grows and grows, like that great mustard seed and the giant bush,

or that light shining on a hill top or a lamp stand,

or yeast in a measure of flour,

or talents which have been invested well and yielded a hundred fold.

You can take your pick of the metaphors:

the meaning is all the same, and remains clear.

We are called to be good stewards –

to be caretakers and cultivators of the treasures of God given to us.

Sitting here or watching online this morning,

on one hand we can see that one treasure we’ve been given

is this space – this beautiful space.

True, it is not the Church.

The Church would continue to exist whether this building did or not.

But we know that we experience holiness in certain places that we do not in others.

I dare say we feel closer to God here in this building

than we do at a shopping mall or a McDonald’s.

There’s a story I’ve seen several times on the internet,

in which someone says that they don’t need to go to Church to experience God,

since God is everywhere:

but a wise monk says, “yes, that is true, of course –

just as water exists everywhere, even in the air we breathe.

But sometimes you need to be led to the well to take a deep drink.”

This building is an icon into the beauty of holiness and the holiness of beauty.

Part of our stewardship as the gathered community

is taken up with physical, concrete things:

a budget that addresses the costs of maintaining a building and a small staff:

a musician whose job is to provide beauty in our worship,

a sexton who keeps our sacred space clean and functioning,

an office assistant to help deal with the mundane but necessary tasks

of administrative work,

and a priest – yes, even me – to offer for you spiritual sacrifices of praise,

but just as importantly,

to be a pastor among you –

to be a shepherd and caretaker:

a job made all the more critical while we are physically separated,

and home visits become the primary mode of encounter and care.

All that is important – as uninspiring as it may sound –

but none of it compares with the greatest truth about stewardship

and about the Church:

the fact that we exist for others.

Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple,

whose feast day we kept not so many days ago,

famously remarked that

“the church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit

of those who are not its members.”

The Church exists primarily for the sake of those who are yet outside of it.

Unlike the world of banking or wealth management,

the parable we hear today

in which we are called to invest great wealth and make it yield abundantly,

is not so that we can enjoy it personally –

rather it is increased only so that it may be given away.

As with so much in the Gospel,

this giving away of it results paradoxically in its continued growth:

strange economics indeed in the Kingdom of God.

This parish exists for the benefit of those of us who are, yes, members –

but our primary goal and focus must be in making known this treasure

to those who are not yet here:

to make known the wonderful riches of God as found in Christ Jesus:

that Good Shepherd, Living Water, True Bread,

Light of the World, and the Way, the Truth, and the Life,

who bears the sins of the world so that,

as we are told in our Gospel reading today,

we may “enter into the joy of [our] master.”

Nothing about the temporary suspension of our public in-person worship

diminishes that great and unchangeable truth;

in this moment we are called to take heart and gird ourselves with strength;

to not faint or be weary,

but to be stirred with resolve, and be filled with hope;

knowing that this second, temporary exile will once again end,

and we will once again assemble together in this space,

and receive the holy Sacrament of the Altar.

It is worth remembering, as small as our present sufferings may be,

that a significant portion of the Hebrew Scriptures were assembled and codified

while the Israelites were in exile in Babylon;

and that the bulk of the New Testament was written by afflicted persons

to a people likewise suffering persecution and hardship.

Facing times like these is in our very DNA as Christians.

Even amongst death and other countless hardships,

Saint Paul never ceased to encourage the churches to build one another up,

to care for the poor among them,

and to contribute to the needs of the saints.

Two thousand some years later,

we find ourselves in a position not so very different,

and convicted by the same great charge laid before us by our Lord and Savior.

So come – enter into the joy of your Master.

To him be honor and glory, power and dominion,

splendor, worship, honor and praise, for ever and for ever more. Amen.