

## Luke 19:11-27

Dear friends in Christ,

Well, here we are, nearly at the end of another Convention of Synod. How's it been? Is God's kingdom closer? Are we more connected with Jesus and each other?

I ask these questions because I have noticed that sometimes we aren't quite sure Synods are about. Is it to encourage us in our common faith and mission? Is it a gathering of family and friends? Or is it a business meeting? Church synods can contain elements of each of these.

Synod is part of our church at work. Just as love for our neighbour and worshipping God are our church at work, so Synods are also the church at work. Just in a different way.

Of course, the work of our synod is only a tiny thing compared to the work of God's church. The church is the body of Jesus Christ incarnate in the world. We glimpse it, particularly in the sacrament, but there's always more than we see or understand. In Synod we confess our common faith in the church but we don't make it what it is. That's God's business.

So if the church is God's business what is this Synod about and what message we will we take back to those at home?

Jesus told many stories to describe the church, or rather, the kingdom of God. He tells us how it happens and what it looks like. For him story was a far better way of describing things than doctrinal statements, constitutions, or organisational charts. Stories help us look at things in fresh ways, and I hear it being said around the LCA quite a bit that this is what we need to do.

So this morning I am picking up on one of Jesus' stories, told in Luke 19:11-27. Like the church herself, it is complex and multi-layered. You can't take it all in at a single reading, so I am going to pick up just one particular aspect. Listen for what goes on between the nobleman and his slaves.

[\*Read Luke 19:11-26 here\*](#)

The nobleman is most probably meant to be Jesus. The time of waiting for him to come back as king is the time we now live in. As he leaves he invests 10 minas each in of 10 slaves. The NRSV translates this as 10 'pounds', worth about 3 months' wages at the time. This is a measurable

amount, not exactly huge, but enough to be getting on with. Then the king comes back and wants to know what they have done with his investment. We only hear the report of 3 out of the 10. The story feels incomplete because 7 do not report back. I suspect that incompleteness is meant to leave me guessing: "If that were me, what would I report to the king?"

Things are looking good with the first two. Business has been profitable. It turns sour with the third, however, because he has done nothing. He's just hidden it in a handkerchief. The king then announces rewards and punishments. They take us by surprise in their generosity and their severity. Jesus ends with the shock statement, "*I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.*"

Commentators commonly think that the 10 pounds given to the 10 slaves represents the gift of salvation. Salvation is always the same gift, whoever gets it. The return on the investment is souls saved for Jesus. The profit is interpreted as growing the church's membership through mission and evangelism, a frequent topic of conversation among us Christians.

But I want to challenge that view. Do we think God is mainly interested in having a bigger church? I tell you, he could have a bigger church any time and in any way he chooses. Not long ago most of the western world appeared to be Christian. The church was supreme in society. We know the story, and some parts of it didn't turn out very well. We know of the brutality of crusades and empire, and the turmoil of the European Reformation.

So I don't think that's what it's about, and neither is this Synod. For a start, the denominational church as we know it didn't exist in Jesus' time. Secondly, the king invests a modest, measurable amount in each slave. He says it is "a very small thing". That can't mean people being saved, because salvation is beyond measure. It can only be a gift. It is not an investment which we can trade in to gain a reward.

I think it is far more likely that the parable is about just what it says it is. It is about how we use God's minor gifts – our material resources – to do his business while we wait for Jesus to come back. It is about having the faith to get on with the job. Jesus often tells us to use our material gifts in the service of the gospel. He calls us to do so in a spirit of generosity – just as

God has been generous with us. A few verses before this story in Luke 19 a re-born Zacchaeus has said, *“Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” (Luke 19:8).*

And that, I hope, is what this Synod is about: generosity; compassion; and love come to life. Our material resources are very small things to God. Used in his service they can be big gifts to others.

So see what happens with the three slaves. When the master calls them up, the two who have turned a profit don't hesitate. They have nothing to hide. They have used his investment freely and with confidence. *“Lord, your pound has made ten [or five] more pounds.”* When the third is called up, it's quite a different story. He has something to hide. As a result he is hostile and accusatory, *“Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.”*

This man does not trust his master. There is no gospel here, no freedom, so sense of grace or generosity. He reaps as he sows. He is afraid. Fear paralyses him. Even his words don't seem to be his own. One of the kings trusted household, he has picked up the negative mantra being chanted outside the palace by the crowds who hate the king.

My question in this short space is to ask how this speaks to the business of our church. As synod we all agree that God has given us his major gift of the gospel. He has made us trusted members of his household. He has set us free. We are his family. Our God welcomes sinners. We know this through our baptism and it is the priceless building block of the church. We even pray to Almighty God as a loving parent.

Now – this life – is the time for us to live this out. Salvation is ours. What about all those small investments, the things we possess? God has invested these things in us – how are we dealing with it?

In the verses that surround this story Luke makes it clear what it means to get about doing God's business and using his investment profitably. Within two chapters:

- the story of the widow and the judge tells us to do justice for others. Justice is a Biblical theme that we often overlook except when it is in our own interests.

- the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector tells us not to take pride in religious observances or churchly things, but to pray, act and live in humility, recognising our wrongs;
- Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler warns of the danger of hanging on to wealth. Jesus gives some disturbing advice, "*Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.*" (Luke 18:22)
- Jesus acts by healing a blind man, and going to the home of a despised man, Zacchaeus, who is then turned to faith and service.

The evidence is compelling. Going about the king's business means getting involved and doing stuff. What we sometimes call 'social justice' is very much on the agenda for Christians as we generously use the 'very small things' we have to make a big difference for others.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is still as much want, hurt, and human need in the world as there ever was. Australia is not always the happy, healthy country we want it to be. People experience need, homelessness, displacement, fear, despair, and rejection, sometimes even at the hands of the church. We know it and we see it. It is reported in news bulletins. We walk past it in our streets. It visits our homes and congregations. This is the world in which God has placed us and tells us to serve generously, just as he has been generous with us.

We are daughters and sons of God, members of his household. Not because we deserve it. It's only because of Jesus Christ. Jesus sets us free – free to live, to love, and to serve others. No fear.

I pray this has been a good Synod for you. May it be an even better one as you take back the message of Jesus' love, in your hearts, in your speech, in your serving, and in everything you are and do as you wait for the king to return.

Amen.