

Remembrance Sunday 2011 – The Parable of the Talents Canon Robert Innes

On *11th November* 1918 the opposing sides in the Great War signed an armistice that marked the end of hostilities on the Western Front. From then on, that day, the 11th of November was kept as a day of Remembrance and marked as a public holiday, in many European nations, including Belgium. In Britain and many Commonwealth countries, the acts of Remembrance were later transferred to the nearest Sunday. So today is observed as Remembrance Sunday, a day to remember those killed in the two world wars and those more generally whose lives have been caught up in warfare. And it is the tradition in many Anglophone countries to wear poppies today, because the poppies grew in the mud churned up in the Fields of Flanders by the opposing armies in the Great War, and the poppies are sold to raise funds for the care of war veterans and their families.

The gospel reading set for today is the parable of the talents. At first sight, this parable seems to have very little to do with Remembrance Sunday. We probably learnt the parable of the talents in Sunday School. Perhaps we may associate it with making the most of our talents, developing our gift for singing, or cooking or languages – making the most of our potential. And that's OK as far as it goes. But this parable is much more than a homely moral tale of self-development. And I hope we'll find it might have more to do with Remembrance Sunday than we would have thought.

We get some initial clues from the other Bible readings today. The Old Testament reading from Zephaniah is a fiery prophecy of the destruction that will fall on those in Jerusalem who complacently assume that nothing bad is ever going to happen to them. "Their wealth will be plundered and their houses demolished" warns the prophet. Our New Testament reading from Thessalonians is, in the same way, a warning to be alert and prepared for the coming day of the Lord. "We do not belong to the night or to the darkness", writes St. Paul. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled."

Looking at the context of the parable of the talents itself, we notice that it comes in Matthew 25 immediately after the parable of the ten bridesmaids that we had read last week. The parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins was concerned with the importance of being ready and prepared for the coming of the bridegroom, having oil in your lamp. But that parable didn't really say *how* you are to be ready for his coming. It is today's parable of the talents which picks up that question. For the parable of the talents tells us that waiting for the coming of God isn't just a matter of passively standing around, like waiting on a platform for a delayed train. It is about responsible activity, using what has been entrusted to us for the good of God's kingdom, acting like good stewards who are charged with running a business and who will have to give an account of their activity when the owner of the business returns.

The talents in the parable are not human gifts or abilities. A talent was a sum of money, a vast sum of money – perhaps 15 years wages. The talents are like a vast inheritance that is passed on to people to manage. And the emphasis in the parable is not, sadly, on the man given 10 talents or the man given 5 talents: our attention is mainly directed at the man given one talent: the one who dug a hole and hid his master's money in the ground. He is the one who when given a vast inheritance of

treasure, does nothing with it. “I knew you to be a hard man”, he says to the master, “so I was afraid and hid your talent in the ground. Here: have it back.”

In its context, the man given one talent surely represents the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees. And the talent, represents the inheritance given to Israel: the law, the divinely ordered political structure of their society, their special place as a chosen people. And the judgement Jesus pronounces is that this inheritance is going to be removed from them and given to others. If you glimpse back at Matthew chapter 23, you read 38 verses of woes to the Pharisees – a terrible passage of judgement that we don’t usually read in church. In the parable of the talents Jesus prophesies that the story is going to move on. The Pharisees had their chance, but they have failed: now a new group, with even bigger treasure and wider responsibilities is moving to the centre of God’s purposes. And thus, in historical terms, it was.

But the warning of the parable is surely not just for its original hearers. It applies down the centuries. Spiritual treasures, material treasures, the inheritance of a well ordered society are given generously by God...but they must be managed responsibly. If not, God will judge those who are lazy or complacent or fall asleep on the job...and he will give the treasure to others.

Let me move from the 1st teaching of Jesus, to 21st century Brussels and invite us to wonder how this might speak to us today.

On Monday members of the British think tank Demos came to Brussels to launch a very interesting and rather disturbing publication. It was commissioned partly in response to the mass murder perpetrated by Anders Breivik at a Youth Camp near Oslo three months ago. It has a rather enigmatic title: it’s called: “The new face of digital populism”. Demos set itself the task of surveying Europeans who are attracted to what it calls populist movements. These are in my terms, extremist political parties. The survey is digital, because many of the people who support extremist parties do so on the internet through social networking and especially through facebook. Demos decided to launch a research project that would address those who tagged an extremist party on facebook.

The political parties we are talking about are, for example, Vlaams Belang here in Belgium, The British National Party, The Danish Peoples Party, the Austrian Freedom Party and the True Fins Finnish Party. These parties until recently tiny, but they now have significant political weight in the parliaments of many countries including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Hungary, the Netherlands, Sweden, Latvia and Slovakia as well as in the European Parliament. In some countries they are the 2nd or 3rd largest party and are necessary members of coalition governments. They often hold a mixture of left wing and right wing political beliefs. For example, Geert Wilders Freedom Party in Holland, which has 24 out of 150 seats in the Dutch Parliament, is right wing on immigration but left wing on issues of personal freedom and sexuality.

Demos discovered 430,000 online adherents of these parties, with the British National Party and the Austrian Freedom Party having 80,000 online adherents each. Demos managed to persuade 10,000 of this online community to fill in a detailed questionnaire to find out how these people are and what they believe.

The first thing they discovered is that these people are mainly young, in their 20s and 30s, and they are mainly men. They are politically active: they vote and they join demonstrations. And they have very low levels of confidence in political institutions. Only 20% of them trust their national governments. Only 14% of them trust the European Union. And they have worryingly low levels of trust in the justice system. For example, out of respondents from Vlaams Belang here in Belgium only 14% trusted the Belgian justice system.

One of the key things Demos wanted to establish was why young men associate with extremist political parties. It has often been thought that they do this because of economic reasons. But the survey showed quite conclusively that the main attraction is cultural. These young men want to protect national and cultural identity. They fear that migrants are destroying their values and culture. People join organisations like “keep Sweden Swedish” or “The true Finns” or “The English Defence League” because of *identity fear*.

At the moment economics is not at the centre of the frame, but the concern is that economic factors could make the situation worse. So if there is a downturn in European economies...and there might well be...if this happens then these online networks of disaffected young men could grow and the influence of these extremist organisations might further increase.

Today is Remembrance Sunday. And as we remember the events of the first half of the 20th century here in Europe I can't help being aware that the feelings of the young men in the Demos survey are worryingly similar to the feelings of many young men in Europe in the 1930s. And much of the history of Europe in the second half of the 20th century has been concerned with making sure that those visceral feelings about cultural identity are channelled in ways that make for good and not for evil.

The parable of the talents is an urgent reminder that those who are entrusted with treasure - spiritual inheritance, political goods, material wealth are required by God to use it fruitfully - else they will lose it.

In an hour or so there will be another service at Holy Trinity specifically for Remembrance. Who will be coming? Well most are not regular church attenders. Some are elderly veterans of armed conflict. A few are diplomats. Many are NATO personnel and their families. But the largest group will probably be children. The whole of our third aisle plus standing room is likely to be taken up by cubs, brownies, scouts and guides from across Brussels. It is particularly important, I think, to engage children and young people in this kind of event. There are some who say, it is time to forget the past and move on. I have some sympathy with that. Certainly the events of the two wars in Europe were so awful that it isn't pleasant to recall them - 70 million or so people died. But the reason for remembering is both to honour those who suffer and also to try to learn from the past. As it is often said, those who don't remember the past are condemned to repeat it. And in an age where there is rising extremist feeling amongst a significant number of young people across many European countries, it is especially important to communicate to a new generation of young people where those kinds of feelings can lead and have led in the past.

Europe has been blessed by God in many ways. It was for many centuries the cradle of Christianity. It has sophisticated political institutions that have taken hundreds of years to evolve. It offers high levels of freedom, security and material prosperity. We have an extraordinarily rich inheritance. On this Remembrance Sunday we give thanks to God for this inheritance and for those who gave their lives to defend it. Those of us who live and work here in Brussels have more potential and possibility than most to safeguard that inheritance and to use it to bear fruit. May God make us alert, and watchful, responsible and worthy stewards of the riches with which we are entrusted.