

## **Sunday 13 November 2005: The Second Sunday before Advent**

### **Teddy bears, clipboards and bottomless pools**

**Readings: 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11; Matthew 25 :14-30**

*When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.*

57 people killed in suicide bombings in hotels in Jordan. 30 killed in restaurant bombing in Baghdad. Tony Blair tells MPs they have made wrong decision and hopes they don't come to rue the day when they rejected his call to allow police to detain terror suspects for up to 90 days without charging them. In France, Jacques Chirac says restoring order is the first priority on tackling the rioting and violence on the streets of Paris. That was the sequence of reports I heard as I listened to the news at lunchtime on Thursday. It left me in little doubt that security is as much an issue in the world today as it was apparently for the 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians of Thessalonica. And if we hoped that after elections in Iraq and Afghanistan, we too would be able to say "there is peace and security" then we've found just as the Thessalonians did 2000 years ago that life is not quite as simple as that.

Of course, security is bound to be an issue because it's actually something we all seek – physical security, economic security, security of tenure in our homes, emotional security. It's a deeply engrained human need and it manifests itself in different ways.

When I was about 7 or 8, some of my need for security was manifested in a teddy bear named Bob. I was about to go on holiday with a friend and her family – the first time I'd been away without *my* family. And the evening before, I announced I couldn't possibly go because Bob had nothing to wear on holiday and I couldn't go without him. Showing infinite patience, my Mum stayed up late to make Bob a T-shirt and shorts, and the next morning both Bob and I took our first step into the unknown. Now I'm marginally more grown-up, Bob has been replaced by a blue clipboard. On the Twinties retreat last weekend, I started our first session clutching that clipboard. "That looks impressive" said someone. "It's all about security" I replied, knowing that the only thing of value hidden within it was an A5 sheet scribbled with four headings. I wasn't feeling entirely prepared for that session but subconsciously my trusty clipboard gave me the security of at least looking prepared. ( I realise that having made this public confession, I'll never be able to use my clipboard again!)

I can't help wondering if security at a national, state level is as much an illusion as teddy bears and clipboards. The concrete walls outside Parliament seem to be getting bigger, the number of armed policemen increases but do we actually believe we are any safer? Today, nearly 90 years on from the first Armistice Day which marked the end of the conflict described then as "the war to end all wars" we remember with honour and respect the names of who died in the service of their country – knowing that even as we do so more names are still being added to that list in conflicts around the world. "The war to end all wars" sadly didn't live up to its name, and all the other things since – nuclear deterrence, Mutually Assured Destruction, smart weaponry – all those things which promised us "peace and security" as nation states have never quite delivered on their promises. We've tried burying what we have under bigger walls, more powerful weapons and more legal restrictions on individual freedoms, but I'm not convinced it's given us the security we desire in order to grow and flourish as a society.

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These last few weeks before Advent are sometimes known as the Kingdom season and that led me to thinking what security looks like when seen from the perspective of the Kingdom of God rather than that of the nation state.

“The Kingdom of heaven is like ...” says Jesus, time and time again in the Gospel readings for these few weeks, and each time unfolds a parable. Today we heard the parable of the talents, with its profoundly uncomfortable conclusion:

*For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.*

I seem to remember growing up on sermons where the parable of the talents was quoted as a way of encouraging children to work hard in school and encouraging adults to put more in the collection plate, and where that deeply unsettling conclusion was, more often than not, left unaddressed. Perhaps that’s why I struggle to find any new insights on security from the Kingdom perspective when thinking of talents as measurables – whether practical or intellectual gifts or material goods.

So what about thinking of talents in a context less obviously measurable? Such as the give-and-take of human relationships and personal interaction? All such interactions have an element of risk – we don’t know with certainty how someone will react and we don’t know with certainty where it will take us. Rather like the servants who traded with their talents knowing that such trade held the potential for loss as well as gain. The servant who went for the more obviously secure option and buried his talent lost nothing but the potential for gain, the possibility of the new.

When we push a bit harder at that door, we find it opens into another of those paradoxes at the heart of the Christian faith. For it seems that when viewed from the perspective of the Kingdom of God, security actually lies in being prepared to take risk; real security lies in being open rather than closed; in giving rather than receiving; in reacting with the second less obvious thought rather than the first safe one that comes to mind; in going with a hunch rather than the logic. The Kingdom of heaven is like said Jesus time and time again until finally he spoke those words with a clarity unsurpassed in the embracing the riskiness of death as the way to life.

When the writer Philip Toynbee was dying of cancer he asked a priest who was visiting him how he came to be ordained. He told him he’d tried several things first – engineering and psychiatric nursing among them – but this was the first pool he had stepped into in which he couldn’t feel the bottom.

Perhaps this parable is telling us that for Kingdom people, the search for real security is all about stepping into pools where we can’t feel the bottom (whatever that might mean for each of us). And perhaps this parable is also telling us that the willingness to step into those profoundly risky pools is the real gift, the real talent that Kingdom people are called to exercise in a fearful world where threats seemingly lie at every turn.

And what about that discomfiting, disturbing end to the parable? *“For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”*

Perhaps it’s suggesting that those who have closed to risk are closed to gain, those who are closed to giving are closed to receiving. Perhaps it’s suggesting that in our relations as individuals and

communities, burying what we have and who we are behind ever bigger walls is not ultimately going to lead to peace and security, but rather to an ever-shrinking arena in which to interact with one another, in which to enter into meaningful, fruitful relationships. Perhaps it's suggesting that any attempt to find our security in living risk-free is actually to risk losing life itself.

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