

**“Life is a Cabaret, old chum—come to the Cabaret”:
Re-interpreting, Reclaiming and Rejoicing in God’s Judgement**

A Series of three Sermons for Benedictus Contemplative Church

1. Judgement of the Individual:
Matthew 25: 14-30 (The Parable of the Talents)
(24th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 18 November 2011)

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+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

It’s a great pleasure to pay my first visit to Benedictus, this wonderful sign to the Church and the community that you’re building here, and to make my debut in your pulpit. My brief is to provide a series of three sermons on God’s judgement at a time in the Church year when this theme looms large in our set readings. Tonight, with Jesus’ parable of the talents, I want to focus on God’s judgement of individuals. Next week, with the parable of the sheep and the goats, as we end the Church year by celebrating our politically and economically disruptive faith in Christ the King, I’ll focus on God’s judgment of the nations. Then, as Advent begins in a fortnight’s time, with the so-called little apocalypse from Mark 13 as our Gospel reading, I’ll conclude with some thoughts on God’s judgement of the whole world.

My aim in this series is to present God’s judgement as good news not bad news—as a key dimension of the gospel rather than its repudiation; as a sharp and confronting way of talking about what God’s love means for us. And, since we’re on the contemplative journey here at Benedictus, I also want to present God’s judgement as a way of understanding the process of self-discovery and conversion that contemplation brings, as our overriding desire for God bears bonus fruit in the transformation of all our desires. Hence the subtitle of my series: “Re-interpreting,

Reclaiming and Rejoicing in God’s Judgement”. When I’m finished with you, I want to have put every last trace of mental reservation about God’s love and goodness towards us and our world out of your minds, and to have reclaimed the fear of God as a way of talking about fruitful contemplative practice.

As for the main title of my series, my intention with it was to suggest that God’s judgement ought to evoke joy and liberation rather than anxiety and withdrawal. You may remember the 1972 film *Cabaret*, set in the dying days of Weimar-era Berlin in 1931, and centred on the Kit Kat Club, where Liza Minelli’s free-spirited American singer, Sally Bowles, held court. In the background a different current was starting to run—of Nazism, and anti-Semitism, recalling all the other poisonous ideological hatreds that we humans regularly prefer over simply loving each other and enjoying life together.

In this atmosphere of growing fear and suspicion, Liza Minelli sings her best-known show tune, directing a question to a nervous and withdrawn young man: “What good is sitting alone in your room? Come hear the music play”. Then comes the refrain from which I take my series title: “Life is a Cabaret, old chum—come to the Cabaret”. Here is an invitation to reinterpret life as joy and gift, no longer as threat and disappointment. Here is a sexy, full-throated invitation to come out of hiding, out of fearful isolation, and to be valued just as you are—an invitation, by the way, that many gay and lesbian Australians heard loud and clear in Wednesday’s postal survey result, and which many Canberrans rushed to accept at that all-night street party in Braddon.

Now, it seems to me that the invitation in tonight’s gospel parable of the talents is marking out similar territory—though this may not strike you as obvious. The usual interpretation is that the master in this parable represents God, pictured here as the boss from hell: if you don’t get with the program, and meet all the key performance indicators, this boss will turn on you and you’ll be made redundant. There were plenty of kings and emperors in antiquity like this, likewise political, organizational and business leaders today—in fact, we even have bishops nowadays

who bully rather than lead and pastor their clergy. But thanks to René Girard, with his theological interpreters, Fathers James Alison and Raymund Schwager, I've learned to read all such parables quite differently, including their harsh outcomes.

This is certainly an edgy and perplexing story, however—all the parables are meant to challenge our conventional prudential wisdom, revealing through shock and even offence that God's love is indiscriminate, unstoppable and has nothing whatever to do with how we typically reckon our just desserts. As for the master in this parable, well, he certainly is a bit of a shocker. He's nothing like the aristocratic scion of an old landed family who's safely wedded to the status quo, holding the only sort of wealth that would be deemed respectable in that bygone agrarian world. Rather, he joins the fast set of pearl fanciers and sharp-practising managers that Jesus gives us in the parables, who are all meant to evoke the urgency and the unconventionality of the Gospel.

We can imagine the master in this parable of the talents as flash, nouveau riche, scary in his unerring eye for the bottom line, yet I don't think we need to think of him as harsh. He gives huge chunks of capital to his servants to invest in his absence, according to their ability, but even the third servant with his one talent gets a sum equal to 15 years' worth of labourer's wages—which in our money might be three-quarters of a million dollars. The master clearly has faith in this third servant, and he certainly wouldn't risk such sums if he was just setting him up for failure.

The first two servants show by their response that they've already entered into the joy of their master, without having to wait for that particular reward. They rejoice in the challenge and off they go, doing famously well. Yet the third servant has a different attitude. He's a malcontent, criticising his master just as the labourers in the vineyard did, who thought they were being ill-treated. He feels entirely out of his depth, declaring that the master is a trickster who pulls profits out of the air and whose expectations are impossible to meet. Fearful self-regard keeps this third servant's head down, and we see how detached he is from his master's confident

exuberance. He certainly doesn't register how much the master trusts him, by being prepared to stake him so lavishly.

Friends, in hearing the parable with its story of this third servant, we're being told that we needn't sit fearful and withdrawn in our rooms, but we should come hear the music play. The Cabaret beckons us, despite any mood of self-regarding fear that can so easily take hold. The master's joy is ours if he can receive it, but as things stand the third servant obviously can't receive it. And don't we see this all the time among the insecure and the disgruntled? We see them eager to blame others for their own problems, and hence they misread their situations—often with disastrous results. When we're in the grip of this particular set of systemic delusions, we tend to miss out on opportunities, so that our negativity becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Friends, all this isn't about competing successfully in a harsh and unforgiving environment, with limited rewards, so that we end up feeling inadequate, fearful, envious, rivalrous, and are driven ultimately to violence. The context of the parable is big business and investment, sure, but the boss isn't a pig; rather, he's just confident, outsized and perhaps a bit scary if we're among the faint-hearted. But he loves us and trusts us and rewards us, and if we know him, then there's plenty of all that to go around. But if we don't know him, and if we don't know how we stand with him, we'll misread his intentions and experience him differently. We'll be offered the thrill of a lifetime but we'll retreat in fear to the equivalent of that Berlin bedsit imagined by Liza Minelli in her song, resolutely refusing to come hear the music play.

The third servant plays it safe, burying his money in the ground: a prudent and widespread option in those days, when such hidden stashes of treasure were found forgotten in fields. He reacts conventionally, though angrily, refusing to step up, and to take the risk, while blaming the master.

And here's my point about God's judgement. It's not the master who throws out the third servant. The words of condemnation at the end of the parable are best understood as words of self-condemnation, from someone who's already far from his master, who *already* finds himself in a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Like everyone who's trapped by such a fearful, self-regarding imagination, the curse they labour under is experienced as external, but it's really internal. With their endless victimhood, complaining and litigation, such people paint an entirely different picture of their tormenter from many others whose experience is entirely different, and overwhelmingly positive. Don't we see this all the time with people who badmouth former employers for bad outcomes that they can't see were of their own making?

Now, there are evangelical Christians wedded to the idea of an angry and disapproving God, who would dispute my reading of this passage and my whole approach to divine judgement. But the other parables of judgement in Matthew are all like this.

The unrighteous tenants who kill the owner's son are invited to recognise that the stone they've rejected has become the cornerstone of a whole new world for them to inhabit if they choose, and that they're not condemned to the violent comeuppance that the mob anticipates. Another example: the foolish bridesmaids are foolish for failing to know and trust the bridegroom, who would have made them welcome anyway, yet their likely resentment of the wise bridesmaids, and their anxiety-driven fools' errand in search of oil, to avoid potential criticism, showed that they were on the outer already. They didn't know the bridegroom and plainly they didn't have any sort of relationship with him. It wasn't the bridegroom who excluded them, though that's how they would have experienced it.

I could go on. These parables and others have Jesus using the imagery of divine judgement, which we know and very likely fear, but he deploys it in the cause of love and reassurance, and as an impetus to conversion—to shake us out of our stubborn withdrawal into a vibrant new reality where music plays, and where thankful celebration takes the place of fearful self-regard. So God's judgement is best understood as the rejection of our self-deceiving, self-destructive motives, and the revealing of our lovability, our trustworthiness, our likeability as God's partners in

new adventures, where we can come at last to know ourselves, and to relax about ourselves.

Friends, the contemplative calling is to dive deep into this reality—deep into the liberating truth of our baptism, that great sacrament of our lovability and of God’s irrepressibly high hopes for us. In contemplative practice, as Father Martin Laird explores with *Into the Silent Land*, we come through grace and discipline to know God and ourselves behind all the self-justifying delusions of ego, and beyond all the myriad distractions that our restless minds constantly throw up, which typically reflect various of our as-yet-unmasked fears. In contemplation, we’re invited away from egotistical clamour into the silence of deep and godly personhood, there to find our true being. Hence contemplation shares in the good news of God’s judgement, drawing us beyond lives of anxious preoccupation into the Cabaret called life, the Cabaret called Jesus Christ, the Cabaret called Church, the Cabaret called Eucharist. And as we receive that invitation anew tonight, as we undergo that judgement, may we receive it as a blessing, not as a curse.

The Lord be with you ...