

The Risk of Faith: Practising Adventure (Matthew 25. 14-30)

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If you told a friend you were off on an adventure this weekend, it's unlikely the first thing they'd imagine is that you're coming to church. Bushwalking, maybe, canyoning, white-water rafting, sky diving ... 'just the usual' ... but church? It's hard to see this kind of expedition making the television ads for the latest four-wheel drive – crashing through the undergrowth, musical crescendo, swerving to miss wild beasts as we make our way to ... the car park at St Ninian's Lyneham. And yet – so we say – adventure is the fifth and final mark of our community, one of the practices around which we shape our common life. Is it just a lame attempt to sound more trendy and exciting than we actually are? Well ... see what you think.

The word 'adventure' comes from the Latin, 'advenire', to come towards, or to arrive. Some tourist operators promote 'planning' your next adventure, but that's a bit of an oxymoron. It's true you can embark on activities or excursions that offer experiences we associate with adventure – risk, adrenalin, newness, exertion. But a real adventure is never totally under your control. Adventure arrives – it befalls us. It's always to some extent an undergoing, a being drawn beyond security and into unknown territory. 'It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door', said the hobbit Bilbo Baggins. 'You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to'. That's adventure. And isn't it exactly what tends to happen when God is around?

In the Christian calendar, we have a whole liturgical season, Advent, to mark this dynamic of faith. Advent is the season before Christmas where we prepare for the coming towards us, the arrival of God's very self in our midst. It is, you might say, the culmination of the Scriptural understanding that God comes towards us not necessarily who and how we expect, not bound by our systems of meaning and

control. God *arrives* and breaks in on our lives, sweeping us off in radically new directions.

When you think of it this way, there are many adventure stories in the bible – occasions on which God is said to break in unexpectedly as people are going blamelessly about their business, calling them to go a different way, to be transformed, to create new possibility for others. There's Abraham and Sarah sent off to a strange land so as to make possible a new people, Moses directed to liberate the Jews from Egypt, Mary asked to bear a child, the disciples interrupted while fishing and tax collecting by the arrival in their midst of the Teacher.

The parable of the talents, which we've just read, may seem an odd story to put into this mix, especially since we're likely to be distracted by its hyperbolic damnation of the slave who failed to deliver. But it strikes me that this story too reflects the fundamental dynamic of advent and adventure. Here though, it's not that God or an angel or a voice from a bush suddenly appears and sets the action in motion. Rather, it's as though the invitation to participate in the divine adventure arrives cleverly disguised as a life.

This parable is one among a series of stories in Matthew that address questions concerning the use of time and gifts, the summons to be awake to the presence and action of God. In this one, Jesus invites his hearers to imagine that a 'man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them'. And (I take it) we're supposed to understand that like these slaves, we too are entrusted with the master's property – with resources and gifts we have not generated and do not own, but which are nevertheless ours to make use of for quite a long period of time – a lifetime, perhaps. And the question is, what are we going to do with them? Will we play it safe, holding grimly on to what we have, living defensively? Or will we risk participating in the generation of more resources, more life ... enabling such abundance as is possible given our particular circumstances and situation?

In relation to the story, it might be objected on behalf of the poor risk averse slave, that he didn't ask to be given a talent to make something of, he didn't seek that responsibility. But that's the thing – none of us did. We are thrown (as Heidegger said) into life – we didn't ask to be here. We have simply arrived in a world in which God is also always arriving, coming towards us, inviting us to participate in the creation of a world, a future.

I've recently encountered what I think may be a fruitful way of imagining what this means in practice. It comes from the field of 'improv' or 'improvisational theatre' about which I've learned just a little. Improv is a form of theatre that involves spontaneous, unscripted collaboration among participants. How it works is that one actor makes what's called 'an offer'. She does something or says something, and it's up to another participant to respond. There's no pre-scripted, no fixed or right way to respond to an offer – but there are responses that help the drama to move, make connections, and generate new worlds, while other kinds of response function to 'block' the action or tie up the flow of energy.

In our parable, it's as if God makes an offer – and implicitly invites a creative, generative engagement with it. The first two respondents take it up; they work with the grain of it and so prove themselves worthy of the offer having been made. More comes of their participation than was there to begin with, and as a consequence they find themselves sharing, entering into the joy of the master. But the third respondent, well, he's so worried about getting it wrong, that he blocks the offer entirely. The master wants his slaves to participate in being generative. But rather than finding this empowering or liberating, the third slave experiences the invitation as a fearful burden. He projects his fear of acting and his fear of failing onto the master – 'I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed'; he refuses to play and the action comes to a grinding halt, the offer and its opportunity buried in the ground.

So ... what does all this mean for us and for our commitment to the mark of adventure? I've been suggesting it's a fundamental theological assumption of our

tradition that God is (so to speak) a God of advent – always coming to meet us, always breaking in upon us, breaking open our tendencies to self-enclosure and drawing us to participate in life's becoming. Faith is about seeking to be awake, watchful, attentive to this advent of God – which sometimes occurs as dramatic and decisive, a 'new thing'; but more often is discerned in the offers held out by life itself – invitations built in to the fabric of our lives to be generative, to work creatively with whatever we're given (even when what we're given is difficult, painful, not what we would have chosen for ourselves) so as participate in the creation of more life, more joy.

But I've also been suggesting that it takes something to accept this offer, to say 'yes' to the advent of God in our lives and to the risk of giving ourselves wholeheartedly to the way. Often, we are afraid. Afraid of getting it wrong, of being drawn out of our depth, of not knowing exactly what we're to do or where it's leading or even how we're supposed to be. So we withhold ourselves at least to some extent; we play it safe; we dare not trust that the one who calls is trustworthy.

And that's why adventure is a practise we commit to, as the last of the marks of Benedictus. Not only do we seek intentionally to be open to the advent of God. We commit also to be willing to live out our vocation in ways we do not yet know and cannot yet imagine. There's no template for us, no pre-determined endpoint for our journey and we are travelling by faith, not sight. And this calls forth particular ways of being as we seek to respond as fully and generously as we can to what we discern of God's being and call; it calls forth courage and whole-heartedness, daring and playfulness. And these are ways of being we can practise in small and daily ways as individuals, and as a community – having a go at something we feel drawn to without being stopped by fear of failure (Helen's Spirit Art, Karina's Kaleidoscope, the new walking group), making an offer into the community just to see whether it generates a response, listening for connections and invitations coming from unexpected places ... with a disposition towards 'yes'.

It's perhaps a quieter looking adventure than some – but make no mistake. When we step out our door, turn into this carpark, when we enter this space of encounter with God and say yes to God's offer to play, it's a wild ride that awaits us – it's the adventure of our lives!