**Pastoral Letter – Sunday 15th November. Second Sunday before Advent**

**Our Reading is Matthew 25:14-30**

Our churches are closed again so I shall be filming the YouTube version of this letter from the village green in Little Budworth. I shall come to the reasons for that a bit later.

The parable of the talents is well known and much loved. As will all good stories it has several layers of meaning. We are reminded how important it is to put to good use our skills and time and finances. A talent is not a coin, a talent is a weight, so its value depends on what currency is used, copper, silver or gold.

But there is another currency here as well, the servants are rewarded or punished not on the basis of profit or loss, but on trust. The key issue is whether they have earned trust.

The servant who buried the talent was criticised because his actions aimed to hand things back exactly the same as before. One of Jesus’ constant battles with the religious authorities was their mindset that God’s law mustn’t change. Religion became an absolute commitment to maintaining the status quo. There was no sense of adventure in that faith, no willingness to take risks, no sense that God travels with his people.

The servants who put their talents to good use earned trust, and they were rewarded. The one who hid his talent safely was not trusted, and his talent was taken away.

Over the past few months churches have worked hard to provide a safe environment to enable people to worship together. This has been greatly valued by many people. We have had to invent new things, undertake new responsibilities, try things we haven’t done before.

I believe the evidence shows that churches have gone above and beyond what was expected of them. I am very disappointed that we have been forced to close during the current lockdown. When this matter was raised in Parliament MPs of all parties repeatedly echoed what our Archbishops had asked for, either produce the evidence why churches need to be closed, or reconsider the closure. I watched that debate with some interest. It was clear someone who needed to listen wasn’t doing so. I understand not everyone sees worship as important to themselves personally, but those in public office have a moral and professional responsibility to listen to the voices of those who understand these things better than them. Like our various servants, this is primarily a matter of trust.

I believe the churches and synagogues and mosques and temples, have shown themselves to be trustworthy. They deserved to be trusted, and to receive some support. Instead they have been treated as the untrustworthy servant and what they had has been taken away.

Now this might sound like a complaint, indeed it is, and I believe with good cause. When the new lockdown came into effect on 5th November churches were asked to re-arrange their Remembrance Sunday services at very short notice. We did so willingly and people have expressed huge appreciation for what we provided. We were able to hold services out of doors, perfectly safely, which many people valued.

So if we were able to hold outdoor services on 8th November how come it is deemed unsafe for us to do so on 15th November? Nothing has changed. Our policies and procedures have been shown to work, why allow it one week and not the next? How can we be asked to provide services outdoors one week and then be told that it is not safe to do so the next week?

The key issue here is trust. People who use their talents wisely and creatively need to see something positive and creative come out of that commitment. That is the model countries in the East have used and it has been shown to be effective. If people are not trusted they will not respond with trust. And as our parable shows, the one who loses trust loses everything.

We all understand we need to live under unusual restrictions, but those restrictions have to be reasonable and proportional. Random and unjustified withdrawal of people’s right to worship with no evidence to say why it is necessary is the stuff of the untrustworthy servant. We deserve better. I believe we have earned the right to expect better.

So I am on the village green, because the latest rules tell me that this side of the wall I am allowed, that side of the wall I am not. And this side of the wall we have evidence of what happens when people use their talents wisely and creatively. We have a wonderful play area which was installed earlier this year. This happened because people have used their skills, time, energy, enthusiasm in the service of others. Not just once, but week after week, month after month, year after year. Trust is earned, and it is earned the hard way. Those who prove themselves trustworthy need to be valued. If we neglect to do that we shall all be poorer for it.

If we are to build a healthy and happy society we need to value those who contribute to it. We need to see some evidence that those who have earned the right to be trusted have trust placed in them.