

A sermon by Jill McCoy at Synod 25 May 2008

Matthew 6, 24 – 34

It seems to me that in our modern world, everyone's an investor. Wherever I look, someone seems to want me to invest in something. If it's not the business & finance people telling me to invest in shares or property or whatever it's the fitness industry telling me to invest in my health or some relationships guru reminding me to invest in my family, or – you get the picture.

Personally, I think the most useful piece of investment advice I've ever read is in the first verse of our Gospel reading this morning. It's not the sort of advice you normally read. Most investment advisers are all about "spreading your risk" by "not putting all your eggs in one basket".

But Jesus says that sometimes, you can't have it all. Sometimes, you have to make a choice.

Specifically, where God is concerned, you have to make a choice. This is the very essence of faith. No hedging your bets. No spreading your risk. It's all or nothing.

Either you put your faith and trust in God. Totally. Absolutely. Or you "invest" that trust somewhere else.

It sounds pretty harsh. But we know that Jesus is right, don't we?

Because investing our life with God isn't just about ensuring a little security for the future.

It's about acknowledging the Sovereign God of the Universe as the Lord of my life. It's about serving God with all my heart and soul and mind, and believing that God knows what I need, and will ensure that I lack nothing.

Those who would follow Jesus must put their faith in God, and trust in God's faithfulness.

So is a life of discipleship all about doing without? Not at all.

Having reminded his followers that they can no longer trust in their own resources, Jesus doesn't proceed to give them a lesson in frugal living. Just the opposite. He assures them that God will ensure that they have all that they need.

Most of us have experienced the truth of this in our own lives. Unfortunately, I've probably experienced it less than I could, because I'm a bit slow on learning to take God at his word on these things. I have to constantly fight the desire to look after for myself the things that God can look after for me much better. But God is kind, and when I finally reach the end of my own resources, and am forced to trust Jesus' words, they never fail. God provides all that I need, and more than I could ever have hoped for.

God is faithful.

The message that Jesus declares in the sermon on the Mount is the same message as Isaiah had proclaimed centuries earlier.

In our reading from Isaiah 49 we are plunged into the middle of one of the 'Servant Songs' - wonderful poetic declarations of the faithfulness of God, offering assurance to refugee Israel that God will indeed restore them to the land of God's promise.

But there is one key point about this great refugee repatriation plan that Israel tended to overlook, to her great detriment. A fundamental truth about God's purposes that Israel was central to Israel's life, as it is to ours. God did not create Israel for the benefit of Israel. God brought this nation into being, brought them to greatness, in order that God's greatness, God's unbounded love and grace, might be made known throughout the whole world.

That was Israel's job description - to make God known among the nations, to be a blessing to others as God had been a blessing to them. And God will restore Israel to her land because God is faithful, and Israel still has work to do as God's agent in the world.

But there's an interesting thing goes on here. Israel seems to constantly look back, to the glory days.

God declares that he is going to do a new thing, and God's people are, frankly, not very interested. They rather liked the old thing, the way things were. They want God to recreate the past, not recreate them for the future.

Sound familiar?

Some years ago, I did some work with a parish that was, frankly, in crisis. They said they wanted to grow, but every new initiative seemed to fizzle and die. Visitors never made that transition to new members. As we talked, it became clear that they were really not interested in seeing God do a new thing. Sure, they wanted young families to join the congregation - new families just like they were 20 or 30 years ago. They were so thoroughly invested in the past that they were unable to invest in God's future.

It's a trap we can all fall into, isn't it?

I saw a great illustration of the problem once. It was my toddler nephew's birthday party, and he was clutching a great armful of presents he had received, carrying them around with great excitement.

Then - a moment of existential crisis. A new gift arrived. He stopped. Absolutely motionless.

He looked down at the armful of joy he was holding. He looked up at the brightly wrapped parcel being held out to him. He let out an enormously, heart-rending scream. The choice was too much.

How often am I, are we, like young Harrison - so caught up with what we are holding on to that we cannot reach out and take hold of the gifts we are being offered?

And there is no doubt that our faithful God does indeed shower us with gifts. Over the past two days, in amongst the business of Synod, there has been ample evidence of God's kindness towards us. Bishop Stephen Hale helped us explore the possibilities of Fresh Expressions of church. One of the things that I find most encouraging is the simplicity, the ordinariness, of many Fresh Expressions.

God doesn't require us to have a comprehensive programme or a grand plan before the Spirit begins to move amongst us. All it takes is a desire to explore, an openness to new possibilities. It might be just two or three people with a vision of what might be. A handful of folk willing to try something different. And God takes that enthusiasm, that preparedness to trust God for a new future, and nurtures and grows it into something wonderful for the Gospel.

It may never be huge the reality of being the Anglican Church in Tasmania is that many things will never be big, because there just aren't the people or the resources to do big. But it's not about big. It's about being open to the grace of God, and continuing God's work in the world.

That's the message of Isaiah: God remains faithful. God will continue to care for God's people, to provide for their every need, to set free the captives, to restore them to the land.

God will create for Israel a future beyond their imagining.

So too in our own experience. Many of you have, I'm sure, prayed faithfully and fervently for many years that God would bring back into the life of the church some of those young people you taught through Sunday School and watched drift off into the world ... And while some continue to wait and pray, others are seeing God answer those prayers.

Some of you have drifted off and then found your way back into the life of faith, sometimes via a long and winding road.

God is at work in our churches, in our communities. Doing things far beyond our imagining.

The invitation of the Gospel is to invest ourselves wholeheartedly in God's new thing. To trust God for the future. To trust God with the future. To let go of whatever it is we find ourselves trying to hold on to, and reach out with open hands and open hearts, striving above all for the kingdom of God, and for God's righteousness.