



The Parables: The Watchful Servant (Luke 12:35-48)

I don't know if you remember a TV series in the Eighties called *Upstairs, Downstairs*. It was about the antics in a London aristocratic house in the Edwardian Britain. The servants were an interesting set of characters. Of course, they were all of different types – chambermaids, dressers, footmen, the cook, the nanny, the kitchen girls, the butler, the chauffeur. Each had their role in ensuring the house ran properly and the family were properly serviced. Apart from their diversity of roles, it was clear that whatever their position, there were some more competent than others to do their tasks. An experienced butler like Hudson was not going to be caught out by the master suddenly returning home. Mrs Bridges the cook always had food available despite the complexity of kitchens in the early twentieth century.

That was the nature of great houses in that period – the best servants were the ones who were most devoted to their employers – they became part of the household and their desire was always to ensure that the family were catered for. Poor servants did their job badly, stole from the master and were not conscientious. “You just can't get the staff these days!” But the good servant was close to the family and was a trusted person. You'll remember the case of Paul Burrell, Princess Diana's butler. Whatever you may think of him, it would seem that Princess Diana entrusted him with some valuable items because she trusted him. He was ready to remain faithful to his employer even after her death.

This is the picture Jesus gives in the first parable in what are in fact three pictures. Jesus mixes a few themes here that he deals with elsewhere too, which shows us that what Jesus was teaching here was a very strong part of His message – so we must sit up and take notice. Here we have a returning bridegroom, preparing for a thief and the master returning after a spell away.

So what is Jesus teaching here? Let me put it this way (*leaves room*). What on earth was all that about? You had no idea why I left, what I was doing or when I'd return. What you had is an expectancy that I would return for whatever reason that you thought I had left.

That's what Jesus is all about. He's gone and we don't know when He will return. Our advantage is we know Him by His Spirit but what is clear from this passage is that we should have an *expectancy* of His return. Just like the efficient Edwardian butler, Jesus' servants are called to be ready for the return of the bridegroom.

What will His return be like? *“Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, 36 like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. 37 It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. 38 It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night. 39 But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. 40 You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”*

His return could be almost any time – even in the middle of the night. Obviously travel in those days gave the servants no idea when the master may return. There were no phones. Usually travel was by day but it could be at night if it were moonlit or the travellers had torches (by that I mean the ones they lit!). The good servant would be ready if he were expecting the master. Jesus mixes metaphors in vv39-40 to give us another picture of expectancy of a thief in the night. If you know if someone is going to attempt to rob you that you are prepared. We are not so familiar with this in Swaffham but when I lived in London, we had to make sure our cars were locked and we had good security on our houses because it was guaranteed that there were people out there ready to rob us and it could be

any time of the day or night. Commonly robbers use darkness to cover for them. Jesus doesn't use that picture here to describe the thief but it is used elsewhere in scripture (1 Thess 5:2-3, Rev 16:15). If you know when the thief is coming, the you're ready for him.

Jesus can return any time. That is the message of this parable – are you prepared? Just a minute – does this apply to me? Once I've done the heart of Service series, you'll know that if we profess Christ, it applies to each one of us. In fact it is suggested that this applies to all who claim to be His servants. Jesus is a bit more cryptic with the disciples because His answer is in verse 48 *From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.* Broadly that means yes but just as in *Upstairs, Downstairs* there were servants of different abilities and responsibilities, so it is in the household of God. What Jesus says in verses 42-48 is that servants are entrusted with responsibilities and the Master leaves *them* with the responsibility of discharging them. It reminds us of the parable of the talents where servants are given different talents. Here the bad servant just forgets about the master and spends his cash on himself because he doesn't believe the master will ever call him to account.

But the Master IS going to return. That's Jesus' message. And what is He going to find? A prepared people? Or people who live as though he will never return and will never bring them to account? It's not just a passage that is about being prepared to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. A servant who is prepared acts and lives as if He is coming NOW. Therefore they are living as though they will be called to account NOW. That's what it means to be prepared – so we are ready NOW. Are we ready?

The idea of prepare is a common one in Luke and is used 14 times. I was impressed by three uses in particular which help us understand where we are as we consider what prepare means.

 John the Baptist said “Prepare the way of the Lord – be repentant, in receipt of God' s forgiveness and ready to give our lives in preparation for His coming. Remember that the “prepare the way of the Lord” scriptures of Isaiah apply to the second coming as much as the first. Have we dealt with our sin? Have we dealt with those areas of our lives we are holding back from God? Being prepared is a process or self-examination. Are we ready for the Saviour? What is He going to find when He returns in my life? Will He find someone who has made the most of what He has given me – or something else? *“Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? 43 It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. But 46 The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers. 47 “That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. 48 But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows.* We are responsible to God. Let's be under no allusions about this. We live in a world that shirks or ignores responsibility. Let's be prepared to come around the Lord's table in repentance this evening and live lives in expectancy of the fact that we will have to give an account of our servant stewardship.

 The disciples are called to prepare the Upper Room for the Passover. In that prepared place they celebrate the Lord's Supper. What is the purpose of preparing the meal we have before us tonight.? It's to remind us that even though He hasn't returned yet, He is here by His Spirit. How do we respond to that? We come before Him in humility. As we eat this prepared meal, we see that God prepared our salvation. He gave us a Saviour who *did not come to be served, but to serve , and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* And as He served, we serve and honour Him by being prepared for His return.

The disciples were called on to go into villages and prepare for Jesus' coming. That preparation was to heal the sick, cast out demons and proclaim that the kingdom of God is here. If we are expectant people, then we are the people who prepare others for His coming. *“Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? 43 It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns.* This could easily apply to leaders and it was Jesus' way of telling His disciples that this definitely was for them. But in another sense it is for all of us. We have a relationship with one another and with others that recognises that Jesus is going to return. We are stewards of words of life. If Jesus could return at any time, then what about all those who don't know Christ? We have words of life, then let's not shirk in

sharing them and being like the unfaithful servant and getting on with our lives as if He will never return.

I was challenged by the following poem called "If Jesus Came Home". The author is unknown but I think it sums up what I have said and more and it prepares us for coming around the Lord's table in repentance.

*If Jesus came to your house to spend a day or two.
If He came unexpectedly, I wonder what you'd do.
Oh, I know you'd give your nicest room to such an honoured guest
And all the food you'd serve to Him would be the very best,
And you would keep assuring Him you're glad to have him there ...
But ... when you saw Him coming, would you meet Him at the door
With arms outstretched in welcome to our heavenly visitor?*

*Or would you maybe change your clothes before you let Him in,
Or hide some magazines and put the Bible where they'd been?
Would you turn off the radio and hope He hadn't heard,
And wish you hadn't uttered that last, loud and hasty word?
Would you hide your worldly music and put some hymn books out?
Could you let Jesus walk right in, or would you rush about?
And I wonder. ... If the Saviour spent a day or two with you,
Would you go right on doing the things you always do?
Would you go right on saying the things you always say?
Would life for you continue as it does from day to day?*

*Would your family conversation keep up its usual pace?
And would you find it hard each meal to say a table grace?
Would you sing the songs you always sing and read the book you read?
And let Him know the things on which your mind and spirit feed?
Would you take Jesus with you everywhere you'd planned to go,
Or would you, maybe, change your plans for just a day or so?
Would you be glad to have Him meet your very closest friends,
Or would you hope they'd stay away until His visit ends?
Would you be glad to have Him stay for-ever on and on,
Or would you sigh with great relief when He at last was gone?
It might be interesting to know the things that you would do,
If Jesus came and spent some time with you.*

