

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

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Matthew 25:14-30

Leviticus 25:8-17

In this month of June we are going to be looking at the idea of the stewardship of our talents. The Bible has lots to say about how we can use our aptitudes and gifts for the furtherance of God's kingdom, but I thought we would begin with this parable, which many people would see as the most important statement about using our talents for God. In fact it is from this parable that we have the word talent in the English language! A talent was a fairly substantial weight of silver or gold in the ancient world. It was like us talking about a "grand" or something like that. The point is that a talent was to do with an amount of money, not to do with natural ability, or strengths in someone's character. But because of this parable and the way that it has been interpreted, the word has come into our language in a way which has nothing to do with money.

You know that your talents are the things that you are good at. And when we talk about the stewardship of our talents we are talking about using our abilities for God.

The two meanings of the word talent have come together recently in tales I have heard, and you may also have heard, of ministers (and Church of England vicars) who give the members of their congregations five or ten pounds each and encourage them to go away and use their talents to make the money grow to raise funds for the church. I am not going to do that, so don't get too excited.

I am not going to do that, because in fact I think that this parable has been badly interpreted over the centuries. It has been taken out of its context within Matthew's gospel and made to bear a meaning that Matthew certainly never intended that it should. This parable, this story of Jesus', the parable of the huge amounts of money, is one of a series of parables about the kingdom of God. If we look at the beginning of the chapter, we see that all three parables which we are about to read in chapter 25 are about God's kingdom. The "it" in verse 14, where the story begins "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves..." that "it" refers back to the kingdom of God.

If this is a parable about the kingdom of God, we can be sure of one thing, based on the other teaching of Jesus: it is not going to be a story whose point is to say that to increase God's kingdom we need to go out and make lots of money.

Those of you who are interested in ancient times and history may have heard of the Nora fragment. I gather that it is a stone which is held in a museum in Sardinia, and engraved on it is what is believed to be the oldest example of written script in existence. It has been in the museum for years, admired by the public, studied by scholars. However in the last quarter of the twentieth century one scholar,

who had visited the museum, left a note for the curator. It read: "I don't want to be the one to embarrass anyone, but this fragment is displayed upside down." For all the years it was displayed the admiring public accepted the fragment as correct, and scholars had even attempted to interpret its enigmatic scrawl. Yet it was upside down.

This parable of Jesus' about the three servants is like that fragment. It is a story which we think we know about, we think we know just what Jesus meant. The usual way for preachers and interpreters of parables to look at this one is to take the talents (which was a unit of money, remember) to represent our gifts and abilities, and to say that Jesus wants us to use our gifts for him. Many sermons along these lines will end by saying "You need to use what you've got or you will lose it", or "Make an investment for God; risk it all for God."

But this is just one interpretation, which makes sense to us because we live in a capitalist society. Our heroes and heroines today are those who make money and are good at it. We may even look down on someone who isn't a good businessman or woman. And this isn't just to do with the people who work in the City of London, or at the head of the beleaguered banks. It's also the attitude of those who go to the supermarket and pride themselves on picking things up on special offer, buying two melons, say, for the price of one, even if they don't need the offered goods, even if two is too many and in fact one will go rotten before it can be used.

We assume that the first listeners to the parable were like us, had the same mind-set as us, because, that's how people think, isn't it? Well, no, not necessarily. Like so many things, it's a learned thought-pattern, a learned set of values.

The people who gathered around Jesus and first heard this parable were mainly peasants. This was a group that had little to call its own (remember that Jesus counselled against keeping a man's coat overnight, if he owed you - that was because it would also be the only blanket). The peasants lived on only enough to survive from day to day. This lifestyle was not bad; as far as they were concerned it was just the way life was meant to be lived. In their first century Mediterranean world, the peasants would assume that everything existed in limited quantity. They weren't far wrong in that. Therefore they believed that if anyone accumulated money or goods they must be depriving someone else. There was only so much to go around, and it wouldn't be fairly shared if some were greedy.

This was the view of God in the Old Testament laws as well. There he laid down rules for something called the year of Jubilee, which was to come every 50 years. In that year land that had been bought was to be returned to the original owners, so that the poverty which had occasioned its sale should not be passed from generation to generation, and no one had the chance to build up an increasingly unfairly large share of what there was.

So when in Jesus' parable the first servant takes his five talents and trades with them to make five more, or the second servant makes four from his two talents, the audience would not have been as impressed as we are. These were the villains of the piece, because if someone else was getting richer, it was the poor, the peasant classes who would pay in the end. Talk about Jesus' parables being bang up to date!

If the first two servants were villains, then what was their master? The third servant says to him, no doubt with his heart in his mouth, knowing he was burning his boats here, "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed." (v:24) And the master doesn't disagree. "You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter..." (v:26) In the traditional interpretation of this parable the master is taken

to stand for God. But how can this be? How can Jesus portray God in this way? He certainly doesn't do it anywhere else. Is this the God to whom Jesus refers when he says "Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom"? I don't think so. Is this master, who seems to value the getting of more above all else, the Father of the man who told the rich young man to "Sell all he had and give to the poor, and then follow me"? I can't see it myself.

If the hero of the piece is not the master nor the first two servants, then it must be the third man. After all, Jesus often told parables and stories in which the last element in the story is the one he commends. In the parable of the sower, it is the last kind of soil which is the good one. In the Good Samaritan it is the last, least acceptable person who does the commendable thing. So perhaps in this parable of the talents we are supposed to place ourselves in the role of the last servant, who is a positive model for us.

And what is this man doing? He is blowing the whistle. The first two servants are henchmen of their master, going along with his schemes, sharing his attitudes and philosophy, and so also sharing his guilt of exploitation. The master and his heavies don't care who suffers so long as they get more wealth and power. The two servants are that most reviled of things - collaborators.

But the third servant didn't go along with things. Instead he did what in Jewish tradition was the most honourable thing to do. He took the talent and he buried it. That way it was safe: safe from him being tempted to spend it for himself; safe from him being tempted to lend it at interest (forbidden under Jewish law); safe from him being tempted to use it to acquire more, at the expense of someone else. He does the honourable thing, even though he knows that it isn't going to make him popular. The third servant knows that what he does will probably seal his fate.

It was what Jesus was doing as he confronted the authorities with his more radical take on worship, on property, on right living. He knew that it would seal his fate, get him labelled as a trouble-maker, but on he went anyway. The parable of the talents urges us to do the right thing.

God doesn't value those who are all get, get, get, and spare no thought for those from whom the getting is done. Who does God value? Well, the answer is in the very next story which Matthew gives us. At the beginning of verse 31 there is a little Greek word, ignored in most translations - the word δε. It means "but". And so the verse reads "But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all his angels with him...." It is a tale told in contrast to this parable we read today. And who is commended in that story? Those who fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited those who were sick or imprisoned. That is the sort of person God the Father values, not the grasping, wheeling-dealing, think-only-of-myself sorts of people that we see in the master and two of his servants in this parable of the talents.

Chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel begins with the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, urging us to be ready for the kingdom of God. Then, in this parable of the vast amounts of money, there is a warning that the lure of worldly ways will try to lead us astray from the values of the kingdom. And finally in the parable of the sheep and the goats there is the vindication of God's children, who have without looking for reward, spent themselves taking care of others.

When it comes to thinking about stewardship, this parable is not, as it turns out, asking us to use our abilities for God. Other parts of Scripture are, but not this one. Instead it is asking us to think about our acquiring, and the way we live very carefully. Our culture makes us collaborators in injustice, and in the continuing impoverishment of vast numbers of people. We are called to stand against the status quo, to stand against the expectations of power, to speak the truth about what is going on in the world - and to live lives consistent with what we say.

And will it make us popular? No, it will not. The third servant is thrown into the utter darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. But we are never alone in darkness, nor are we the first to tread a path called honour. Jesus was an honourable servant who was cast out into the darkness of Golgotha, where women wept and those on either side gnashed their teeth. But God was still with him, still achieving his purpose.

As we gather today around the table of our Lord, let us remember that it was his honourable and consistent way of living and teaching the truth which brought him to have his body broken and blood spilled – broken and spilled for our salvation. By Jesus we are saved from the eternal consequences of our sinful collusion with the world. But as his followers we are called to seek to live mindfully in everything we do.