

Trinity 23

<https://youtu.be/JY6NQ8-cck4>

Matthew 25.14-30 (NRSV)

The Parable of the Talents

¹⁴ ‘For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, “Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.” ²¹ His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; *enter into the joy of your master.*” ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.” ²³ His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; *enter into the joy of your master.*” ²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” ²⁶ But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return, I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

My text this morning is written in Matthew 25 and verse 29, which reads:

For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

This parable has been much misunderstood and misused and this happens when it is not seen within both the context of Jesus teaching about the *kingdom of heaven* and Matthew’s use of the parable to explain the delay in our Lord’s return or *The Parousia*. It is therefore *not* about how to use money and earn interest, and it also has nothing to do with any notion like ‘if you work really hard, you will deserve rich rewards.’ Sadly, this last error is especially prevalent today within the mega-Church movement and its prosperity Gospel, which preaches this mistaken message. How it is meant to be understood is made crystal clear by the opening words ‘*For it is as if ...*’ stating that it is all about ‘the kingdom of heaven’ which is like ‘... a man, going on a journey summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them ...’

Here, Matthew continues with the important themes of the previous parable, of being watchful and using our time wisely in our service of God. Now he adds the important point that we are all privileged to have been given talents *according to our ability* (verse 15) that

can be used to bless others. Like the Bridesmaids, we too are given opportunities to be of service. It does not matter if some talents seem more important than others; they all matter, because by using them well, we bring ourselves and others to experience the joy of our Lord (verse 21).

Remember the context. The Jewish Christians in exile in Antioch, like others, had expected Christ to return soon after the Ascension. But much had happened since then, and the *Parousia* had not happened. Matthew had made the point in our last reading, that the time of our Lord's return and the judgement, is of no importance, but our readiness for it, is. Here he illustrates this point by using an image that his readers would all have easily identified with.

A central part of the Jewish liturgical calendar is the feast called *Sukkot* (also known as Tabernacles or Booths). According to Leviticus 23:42 every Jewish family needed to build a temporary shelter where they would live for the duration of the festival, to remind them that their only real source of security and protection, is God. In modern times, this is not taken literally, but, according to Jonathan Sacks (who sadly died last week) the festival is '... a tutorial in how to *live with insecurity and still celebrate life*.' How appropriate then is this modern Jewish understanding for us in our uncertain times. As Sacks continued: 'Life can be full of risk and yet still be a blessing.' But what would have struck a special chord with Matthew's first readers would have been the requirement of Deuteronomy 16.16b-17:

... at the festival ... they shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed; ¹⁷all shall give as they are able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you.

Notice then how the words of Jesus would have resonated with his first audience: '... to each according to his ability.' In *Sukkot*, the people rejoiced because of the blessing they had received, which came about through a mixture of *divine generosity* plus *God-given ability*. It is this combination that always leads to great blessing and joy. And this is what the Parable of the Talents highlights for us: we have all been given gifts through God's *generosity* as well as talent or *ability* in order to be able to use them to bless ourselves and others with the gifts. The question is: "Are we being *faithful*?"

A wealthy man went away on business and left the remainder of his wealth to his workers – each according to their ability. The wealth is expressed in '*talents*' which was the largest unit of currency at the time. In NT Greek 'talent' referred to money, but it also refers to 'gifts' and it is largely as a result of this parable and because of the phrase '... according to his ability' that the English word refers to a special talent for something.

For Matthew's initial readers, the phrase, 'After a long time ...' (Verse 19) would have been of great significance because it would have explained the delay of the *Parousia*. But the master *does return* and demands a reckoning – which is a reference to the fact that, delay there may well be, but the time will come when there will be a final judgement. The first two servants were praised for both their industry and courage in doubling their amounts of money, and especially for their *faithfulness*. The fact that both servants received the same reward showed how it is not one's accomplishments that matter, but rather one's faithfulness. Jesus's disciples were not all called to great things. Like them, most of us are just called to do the work that Jesus has given us to do – and for many it can be as simple as being faithful in our agape love others – and that it is! But this is only true if for some good reason, there is nothing else that we can do. If we have talents, and by far the majority of Christians all do –

even if they might seem to be insignificant, we are required to put them to good use. Paul explains this graphically in 1 Corinthians 12, where he speaks of the Church as being like a body. He explains that *all* the members are equally important to the body's well-being. He writes:

... the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ... ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ... And I will show you a still more excellent way.

The last servant was condemned because of his inactivity. He had been given a talent albeit a modest one, but he had done nothing with it. His defence lacked any logic. He put forward the excuse that it was because of the demanding nature of the master that he did nothing. Notice how disabling fear can be. The slave that buried his talent in the ground had a distorted idea of his master. It was fear that disabled him from going out in faith, and it was this fear that robbed him of blessing and joy. In the context of the parable, this man had made his *gift* into a *possession*. Gifts unused are lost, and the reward for service is further service, the blessing of which always fills our lives with a deep sense of purpose, inner peace and joy.

So, what does it all mean for us today?

For the early Christians (and for us), there is also another layer of meaning where the master's going on a journey would have been a reference to the Ascension, the slaves are the Christians, and the talents would have referred to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

We have noted that for Matthew's readers, there is an element of the *Parousia* in this passage, continuing the explanation for its delay, which Matthew began with the Parable of the Bridesmaids. We now know that an important reason why the Gospel narratives were eventually written down, was because the long-awaited return of Jesus in the *Second Coming*, had not happened. But they did not doubt that Jesus *would* return as a judge, and that people would need to give account of how they had lived their lives. Those who want to share in all the blessings, must use their time wisely in their service of God. At this level, all Christians have been given gifts and we will be judged on how effectively we have used them.

The horrible reference to 'outer darkness' and the 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' is typical of the hyperbole used in parables that we know was a regular feature at the time. This understanding is important because some have abused this passage to preach hell fire and brimstone. It is simply not Biblical to do so. In fact, it is interesting to note that in the most widely respected modern English translation – the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) – the word 'hell' never appears at all. And, most importantly, it is the *fear* that this sort of understanding brings about, that is at the core of what our Lord is condemning here! We are responsible for how we use our time, and our gifts and talents, but not out of fear, but because we love and seek to demonstrate our love in who we are, and what we do.

When *Jesus first told this Parable*, it probably had no reference to The Parousia at all, and it was probably linked to the crisis that the ministry of Jesus had presented to the religious authorities. (Fenton) Here, Jesus was responding, and the condemned slave was therefore a reference to the Scribes and the Pharisees and their use – or rather misuse – of the Law of God, and the truth of God, as revealed in the Scriptures. The religious authorities wanted to keep things exactly as they were, changing nothing at all – like the man who buried his talent.

This is why they were condemned. William Barclay comments: ‘In this parable Jesus tells us that there can be no religion without adventure and that God can find no use for the shut mind.’ This is at the heart of the gift we have to offer society, and why it is imperative that we find ways of getting people’s attention once more, and rectify all those misconceptions that bury the truth, and so rob people of meaning, purpose and joy in their lives now. There is a sense, therefore, that unless we do this, while we might not have been guilty of burying it, knowing that it is buried, and leaving it there, is tantamount to the same thing. I am so pleased by the enthusiasm of the Churches in the Allestree and Duffield section to meet this important challenge. Already we are some way along the path to accepting a new *Mission Statement* with its explanatory vision – and this does make it clear what we all stand for. We are also exploring how better to use our websites in order to better inform those who might be interested in what we have to offer. The following passages help to explain the link between the rational message leading to faith, and which results in hope:

Romans 15.4:

⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that *by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.*

Ephesians 1.17-18:

¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a *spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him,* ¹⁸so that, with *the eyes of your heart enlightened,* you may know what is the hope to which he has called you ...

1 Peter 3.15-16:

... in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be *ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you;* ¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

This is so important because people in modern society have moved on from a simplistic atheism to agree that *love* is all that really matters, but that it is seldom realised in practise. The great secular minds of our age – philosophers like Julian Baggini (whom I have mentioned before) - have come to agree that the message of what Jesus called ‘the kingdom of God’ - where people love each other, as a present reality - is really worth having and striving for, as the *summum bonum* or the ‘greatest good’. But as Baggini himself has come to realise, this ideal is impossible without God. Baggini writes:

It is also true that without God our capacity to realise this ‘Kingdom of God’ is extremely limited ... if you secularise Jesus’ teachings ‘it does not quite leave you with enough *hope* to carry on’.

Our ‘talent’ that needs to be multiplied over and over again is *the true message of hope*. We need to use whatever means available to us, to show the world that *thinks* that Christianity is irrational, that it is dated, that it is only for children – is not the faith that we stand for, and the fact that this popular misunderstanding is a distortion of the timeless truth going back to Jesus himself. It is this *message* - the Gospel, the Good News - that matters above all else, especially in our current crisis. All the other practical things that we do in reaching out, remain vital and we must continue to do all of them and perhaps even more. But there are also many other secular organisations that do the same things. Our unique selling point or USP – what only Christians can offer - is that we also have the true message of hope which is the product of an ancient time-tested and rational faith.

Jesus is alive and present in the Church as we meet, whether in a building or in spirit. We have also now been reminded many times, that the gateway into this hope is faith, and that faith comes from being immersed in the Scriptures, because God still speaks to us in a rationally understandable way through the Scriptures, when we open our minds to receive what He has to say to us. This is why being part of a preached message is a sacred thing, and for me one of the greatest privileges possible. Jesus speaks, not only through the mouth of the preacher but also in the discussions of the message and in the gatherings of the people of God. All people will be called to give account, and they will be judged if they persist in burying the truth that is being revealed, rather than setting it and people free to discern the mind of God. Jesus challenges us by asking are we open-minded, are we adventurous, is our faith alive and vibrant, or is it buried and dead in the ground?

In addition to all this, each individual one of us has been given a gift, some perhaps many gifts, from God, and they are all immeasurably valuable, because they come to us from God *according to our ability*. We are never asked to do anything that God does not also equip us to do. It is not the talent or gift we have that matters, but what we do with it. The reward we can look forward to when we are faithful is *more work*. The ones who doubled their talents were given more, so greater tasks and greater responsibilities. The consequence for not using one's talent is not the losing it, because if we did nothing with it, we never really had it. Using one's talents implies risk – living radically for Christ – and this brings a richness and fulness to our lives. We need never fear, because the more we use what we have been given, the better we get at using it! But not to use it will mean that we lose it.

As soon as we become active by using the talents we have been given, Jesus comes into our lives and blesses us and others through us – we are given more. This compounds our blessings over and over and over again. Or as Jesus put it to his listeners:

For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

Amen

The Revd David Owen
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