

We have had two parables in the last fortnight: faithful and wise servants, and the wise and foolish virgins. Now we have Jesus' story of the talents. All three are about the delay of the parousia or second coming of Christ, preparedness for the end, and recompense at the great judgement. Let's not kid ourselves: there IS going to be a judgement.

To give a very quick overview of the reading: the master is Jesus, his slaves are the church, whose members have received various responsibilities. The master's departure represents the departure of the earthly Jesus, and his long absence is the current life of the church today. The Master's return is the return of the Son of Man. The rewards given to the good slaves stand for heavenly rewards given to the faithful at the great assize, and their joy is that of the messianic banquet.

The punishment of the evil slave represents those within the church who, through their sins of omission, condemn themselves to darkness. While Jesus is repeating some of his earlier teaching, he introduces a new idea: that Christians have received gifts according to their ability and it is what they make of those gifts which counts in the end. So, Jesus aims the parable at the church and not to the world. We must therefore take careful note.

Last week the bridesmaids were responsible for providing and managing their own oil. Some managed it wisely and some poorly. This week, the master gives the "talents" to his slaves. Does it become their own property to manage or does it still belong to their master?

In the story, it may seem strange to us that a wealthy businessman, before leaving, entrusted *slaves* with so much money and responsibility. However, slaves could fill an enormous range of functions, including positions involving onerous duties, political influence, and high social esteem. Viewing a slave as a Baldrick was not always necessary.

While we often use "talents" to refer to human abilities, I don't think

this is what the parable is driving at. The word in this text refers to a very large sum of money - between 75- 96 pounds weight of silver. It would take up to 20 years of work at the basic wage of one denarius a day to equal one talent. So, Jesus is using hyperbole again to catch everybody's attention. Just as he does when he tells us to tear out our own eyeball. Or to take the plank out of our eye. In this story the master was very generous to all the slaves, even the one who received only one talent: One talent is wages for 20 years; two talents, wages for 40 years; five talents, wages for 100 years.

When the master "gives" his property to the slaves, does the money then belong to the slaves? Is Jesus showing God as very generous? Or are the slaves just managers of their master's money, stewards of what belongs to God? Both approaches have merit, and to read the parable each way is certainly helpful Bible study.

Nevertheless, I believe that the money became the servants' property. The word in the original Greek, *paradidomi*, usually means, "to give or hand over" and in legal terms I think it carries the meaning "giving up control of." So the NRSV rendering "Entrusted" is not really the right way to translate this word - King James has 'delivered'. It makes more sense, I think. After all, Matthew records none of the servants as giving back any of the money to their master when he has returned.

I have said that the parable is about salvation, but there is a wrinkle. Each received "according to his own ability" which shows that the starting point of the parable is about different gifts of the redeemed members of the church. People's abilities are not all the same.

I think that the contrasts between the first two slaves and the third give clues for interpreting this parable. Matthew tells us that the first two slaves worked with the talents. He describes the third slave as lazy. Jesus clearly wants us to be "workers" or "labourers" in God's plentiful harvest. We are to let others see our good works. In contrast to working, the third slave "shrinks" from work.

But, the master gave no clear instructions. So the slave was left to work out for himself what to do with this generous gift. So what one does while waiting for the second coming goes beyond mere obedience. It is up to us how we use our time and God's generosity while waiting for Christ's return? We have been generously and lavishly gifted by God, what are we going to do about it?

I offered first a contrast between a good worker and an idle man. Yet you could also see it this way: The master calls the first two slaves "good" and the third slave "evil". I find this comparison very difficult, and I am not entirely sure I know what the Lord is saying.

Jesus used these words elsewhere to describe good or bad trees that produce good or bad fruit. So we should also perhaps see this story in terms of good or bad people who bring good or bad things out of good or bad treasure. Perhaps it is not so much that producing the good return which made the slaves good; rather there was a good quality about them before the master ever gave them the talents. But that must mean there was an evil quality about the third slave that resulted in his being called evil. That is frightening if we simply leave it like that. Because becoming welded into the mind-set that would be terrible "God made me bad, so there is no point in even trying to be good." Could we ever say that the master gave the third slave bad treasure from the outset? I am sure this cannot be so.

The first two slaves seem grateful for what the master has given them. The third slave rationalizes his inactivity by blaming the master. "I was afraid (of you)."

The master does not disagree with the third servant's perception of him; but he suggests that if that is what the servant believed, why didn't he seek to earn a little interest = to reap where he didn't sow = to gather where he didn't scatter -- as he knew his master demanded? If he **knew** that the master wanted more, why not earn a bit more? If he were afraid of his master, why didn't he **do** what he knew the master wanted?

Perhaps what the parable of the three slaves illustrates is how they used their "abilities". If God gave to them according to their own abilities, then presumably the third servant did have the ability to do something, and **wasn't** doomed from birth, if I can put it like that. Perhaps he was lazy or lacked ambition. Perhaps he didn't want to take responsibility for his own actions, but blamed his master. He simply didn't let what he **knew** about his master govern his actions.

Finally I would like to pause for a moment on what happened to the lazy slave.

The first two slaves enter the joy of their master. The third slave is cast into the outer darkness. Darkness is elsewhere used as an image for hell. The end of the third servant shows that he should have been even more afraid of his master and acted more appropriately on that fear. Or, like the first two servants, he should have concentrated on the generosity of his master and joyfully risked everything while trusting that generosity.

I would guess that the first two servants had great joy in using and increasing the talents that the master had given them. But to make this parable suggest that a believer can lose salvation if he or she fails to serve Christ distorts it, I think.

The parable further defines the general theme of "watching" while Christ is away. Watching does not mean settling down to inactivity. It means wholehearted commitment to Christ's purposes in this present world. While God will commend those who are faithful in this mission, He will surely judge the "worthless" servant who fails to make every effort to serve Him. Can you think of facing Christ to be told "You were a worthless servant?"

### **TALENTS? WHAT TALENTS?**

*Sunday morning - 16 November 2008*

If we are ever to enter fully into the glorious liberty of the children of God, we are going to have to spend more time thinking about freedom than we do. Surely, for the church community, the "talents" represent the good News of Jesus Christ - our ultimate salvation - isn't that the greatest treasure God has given the church. God generously gives it. By trying to protect it, or it keeping it to ourselves, we risk losing it.

Could not we say the same thing of sharing love? Or sharing the gospel? Our ability to love doesn't diminish by sharing it; and when we share it there will be more love in the world. Sharing it does not diminish the power of the gospel; if we share it, tell it out, there could be more believers in the world.

On the other hand, there are also examples of things that disappear if they are not used. Unused muscles atrophy and become useless. Unused money in some bank accounts will disappear as the bank charges monthly fees. Could it also be true of the gospel? If we hoard it for ourselves, if we refuse to share it with others, can it waste away?

The parable is certainly not a gentle tale about what Christians do with their individual gifts and talents, but a disturbing story about what Christians do or do not do with the gospel as they wait for the coming of the kingdom of heaven. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we would be as concerned about increasing the spread of the gospel, God's grace, as we are about increasing the return on our financial investments in this time of credit crunch?

What are we individually, and as a church doing with the generous gift of the gospel while waiting for Jesus to return?