

Using talents

Psalm 90:1-8; Matthew 25:14-30

No parable in the Bible has been more misused than Jesus' parable of the talents.ⁱ Parables are complicated and many layered. We need to resist the temptation to turn this parable only into an allegory, with every part having a secret meaning. Traditionally this story of Jesus, told in the first century AD in a Palestine occupied by the Romans and subjected to harsh social and economic realities, is used as a means to encourage Christians to discover and use their gifts and abilities shrewdly and generously to the glory of God. It is not wrong to give God glory with every aspect of our being. But we need to give thought to this problematic story, working out what it might have meant in Jesus' time. Then working out what it might mean for us, today, in the C21st.

First of all, the wealthy master going on the journey is not God. He is what Jesus says he is – a wealthy landowner with substantial property, servants, and enough money to go on a long journey. He doesn't come across as particularly pleasant. Jesus' hearers had to contend with such masters and overseers every day. What if this story Jesus is telling is not primarily theological or moral but political and economic? What if this parable is about exposing exploitation rather than revealing justification? A scholar helpfully reminds us that Jesus' parables were meant to be discussion starters, not neat little stories with a beginning, a middle and an end. What kind of discussion does this parable then open up?ⁱⁱ

What if the first two slaves, successful in their venture capitalism and turning in healthy profits for their master, and themselves, are not the main subject, but rather, it is the *third* slave on whom we should focus? He feared the master, but rather than flattering, the third slave is audaciously honest, and called the master for the harsh and exploitative landowner he was. He extracted land

and produce from the poor without doing any work himself. For this the third slave is fired and cast into outer darkness, often the fate of those who refuse to play along with the system. Isn't that the fate of many in Jesus' time, and in our own? Where would you find Jesus in that interpretation? Outside in the cold and dark with the least and the last and the lost. That is, after all, where Jesus dies: at Calvary, outside the city walls in a darkness that covers the earth.

Parables, these stories Jesus tells, have many layers.

What if we need to ask questions about the word 'talents'? A talent was a monetary term, referring to a piece of gold or silver. In Jesus' day a talent was a unit of money approximating to fifteen years of earnings for a labourer. Each of the gifts given to the slaves here are enormous. To be entrusted with five talents was to be entrusted with more than a lifetime's worth of average wages, the equivalent to something like seventy-five years of earnings. That's a huge amount of trust.

When the wealthy master goes away, the first slave takes the money to market, a wealth management firm, and invests in high-risk ventures. The second does the same, putting the money to work at high risk. They both do incredibly well.

The third slave digs a hole in the ground, a common thing in ancient times to protect your money. In a time of economic upheaval, as in Jesus' time, this man looks quite wise. He is not a bad man but a prudent, careful, cautious investor. He takes no chances. It's all there and he gives back exactly what he's been given. But he is treated as harshly as anyone in the whole Bible.ⁱⁱⁱ

I can't help wondering how it would have worked out if the first two slaves putting their money into a high-risk venture had lost it all. But then again, what if this parable is not about investment practices, or lack of them, or even financial prudence? What if it is not simply about our talents or gifts? What if it is about our *attitude* to how we respond in life with who we are, and how ready

we are to the kind of things Jesus is looking for in His world, in His Kingdom, when He comes again?

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What if this story Jesus tells is urging us not be ruled by fear, and to do nothing, but to use our imagination, strength, wit, experience to make the most of who we are as well as what we have got. Faithful living is not static. Are we too good at holding on to the talent we have, knowing what we should do with it, but not doing so? We bury too much goodness, time, love, treasure, and talent in the ground. What we do and fail to do shapes the world and our lives.^{iv}

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It would have meant different things to its first hearers, as it will mean different things to each one of us. Whatever it is, it is not one-dimensional. Jesus teaches to make us think, and question, and work out for ourselves what the meaning is for us in the here and now. I can remember many years ago someone saying to me at the church door, "Would you just tell me what to think, and I'll believe you!" I then told him what to think and was told, "Oh but I don't believe that!" Or maybe it should have been, "I don't *want* to believe that!" The teachings of Jesus call from us a response. Maybe amongst all the layers of the parable of the talents, that is one of the things that Jesus wants us to grapple with. Do we believe He's coming back, or believe Jesus expects us to *do* something about making the world a better place, or that He is looking for us to use the talents we have been given? What if this story we have been told has as one of its implications, "Jesus is coming, look busy!"

The point about living a faithful life is about taking risks. Is it the case that this parable, this layered story, wants us to look at what Jesus has done, and what Jesus hopes and expects of us whilst He is away? Is it the case that the greatest risk of all is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and

profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. Is it the case that the greatest risk of all is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently? Not living, not loving, not caring, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity. Playing it safe, investing nothing, being cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying all that talent in the ground.^v

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor, and pacifist, active in the 1930s and 1940s, opposed to the Hitler regime, took his responsibility to confront evil so seriously that he joined the German Resistance and was executed for his part in a plot to assassinate Hitler. His sense of responsibility cost him his life. He once said that the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility. Is that the weeping and wailing, is that the outer darkness that those who don't risk anything are condemned to in this many-layered story Jesus told?

What do we do with the talent God has given us? Has our faith become more of a personal comfort zone, our personal security in the here and now, and in the hereafter? Have we domesticated our faith to a list of beliefs about God and Jesus which we keep in our heads for Sundays? Have we accepted faith because it's what we've been taught, and somebody else will sort out the awkward, ragged edges because it's too hard for us? Is our faith something that can only be about bright, happy things, and avoiding the difficult, unsettling realities in our world? Has our faith become a non-risky venture?

I wonder if you were expecting a sermon on the parable of the talents to be a call to help with the car rota, or the Wednesday coffee morning, or delivering flowers, or helping with the impending Christmas tree festival, or even reviewing your financial giving to help the church. These are all important. Help where you can, please! Maybe even talking about money might have been safer

than some of the things this scratchy, jagged story of Jesus asks us to consider. Not only what do we believe, but how we show it in the way we live.

Jesus is inviting us, every single one, on the adventure of faith; the high-risk venture of being His follower, and deploying every one of our greatest treasures, whatever they are, to shape a better world. Until He comes again. Come, Thou, long-expected Jesus. Jesus is coming! Look busy!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, p209

ⁱⁱ William R Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, in Barbara K Lundblad, *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Vol 2*, pps361-362

ⁱⁱⁱ John M Buchanan, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4*, p310

^{iv} Lindsay P Armstrong, *ibid*, p311-312

^v Buchanan, p310