

Matthew 25:14-30 Parable of the Talents

There are three blocks of teaching in Matthew 25 that are about someone being away and then returning - three parables for the last three weeks of the liturgical year. Last week a bridegroom, this Sunday a rich businessman, and next week, for the final Sunday of the church year, the Lord himself.. The focus of this teaching is the period of waiting for someone to return and what we do with those twenty four hours allocated to us each day. It's all about time... So along with our reading from 1 Thessalonians (most scholars agree this is the earliest writing we have from the New Testament) we are peering over the shoulders of this first generation of Christians and looking at what preoccupied them about time. One of the major answers was the return of Christ in glory.

This talk of the return of Christ is not a comfortable topic for modern Christians. Many of look askance at the ravings and frenzied predictions and feel embarrassed. The solution is to collapse the doctrine into something that nearly fits into the spiritual life of the individual. That is the return of Christ happens all the time as a person, in the power of the Spirit, lives faithfully. True enough but I can't help but feel that this is not wholly adequate to deal with this vexing topic of time and whatever is meant by the Parousia - fancy name for the return of Christ.

There's been a lot of time. As far as the universe is concerned, time had a beginning. The starting point was 13.799 billion years ago when the [Big Bang](#) occurred. We do not get doled out equal shares of anything much except time. One of the few, maybe the only thing, where we are all equal is each of us is equally allocated 24 hours in each day. How long and to what extent we get to enjoy those series of equally timed 24 hour days is an entirely different matter and takes us into the life is not fair aspect. We see that played out in the allocation of differing number of talents in today's parable.

I would really like someone to invent a time bank where you could deposit time when you had excess and withdraw time when you were running late or just wanted more time to enjoy an activity.

And one of the most pressing issues was this unexplainable and disconcerting delay in the return of the master, the Lord. Our spiritual ancestors quickly realised it was not meant to be like this; the Lord should have returned by now. In the scriptures we can read how they were grappling with this reality and saying stuff like, "We did not think we would have to be dealing with the deaths of our sisters and brothers in the faith". By now it has pushed out to ... maybe 50 years after the resurrection of Jesus and how to maintain a life of faithful expectancy while occupying the waiting period has become a critical topic.

Looking at the parable. First thing to say, I don't at all believe Jesus is like that harsh master in the parable. It is a story Jesus told to make a point about grasping the opportunities our gifted lives present. I don't think we need to find some one to one correspondence and make the demanding and greedy master into a Christ figure (is he really? The third servant accuses the master of being harsh and rapacious and the

master accuses the servant of being wicked and lazy). . You simply can't live life with joyfulness, confidence and trust if at the same time you live in fear of a harsh and psychopathic master waiting to chop you in little pieces at the end of it all. Jesus draws the best from us; in his company we learn the way of faith and take him as our teacher and model. But it is true; It is your time, your life we are talking about here... you get one shot at it. Don't spend it passively waiting for something to happen.

The parable is told in terms of putting money to work to increase wealth. Investments. And that kind of steers us away from feeling the force of the message of the parable. The best way I can make sense of it is to remember this is a kingdom parable, it is about making the reign of God grow not a "lets make lots of money parable". So we should be thinking more in terms of "how would it change the impact/message of the parable if we think that the master has given the responsibility to the servants of making love grow on the face of the earth?". Thats the way to think of this parable. Not just those servants in the story but each of us. Given the responsibility of making love abundant during the years of our life on earth. And if we do not, if we ignore that, refuse to accept that, deny that calling... then what?

We miss the outrageously large amounts of money being talked about in this reading. One talent does not sound much does it? It is actually a huge amount. A talent was not a coin but a weight. Even the one talent guy has a massive amount of money at his disposal ... surely there is a point being made here about the abundant exuberance of the gospel entrusted into our care and a prohibition upon the mooching around "Oh I'm only a one talent person, look at all those 2 talent and 5 talent people." One talent! man you have a fortune! Don't compare yourself or your eye will slip from what you do have onto what you do not have.

The one with the one talent is not condemned for failing to produce as much as the person with the five, but for failing to make good use of even their one. He lives his life in fear that this is some sort of test. This is the person who sees God as the harsh examiner in the sky, watching us for mistakes and eager to find a reason to condemn us. How often our perception of someone, even God, does end up shaping our experience of that person or God. In the parable the servant says he knew the master was harsh and out of fear did nothing with the talent and actually brought about the harshness he feared. And so, fearful of slipping up, such a person never risks engaging with the fullness of actually living. Such a one comes to the end of their life satisfied simply that they did not catastrophically stuff up their lives. What a relief to have got through the journey still pretty much in one piece! As the genteel bishop used to pray each day. "Lord let nothing happen today". Fear shuts us down

Today's parable of the talents and the different allocation of the talents 5, 2, 1, according to the slave's ability highlights the unequalness of life - and makes the point that life is mostly about what we do about that this unequalness. Accept it; embrace it; get on with living with what we have... or live complaining, resentful, fearful? Dealing with this issue and coming to the point of accepting the hand we have been dealt in the lottery of life is one of the tasks we must accomplish in growing to maturity.

While the parable has some challenging aspects one thing I really like about it is that it holds up risky innovative behaviour as the way of the gospel. Too often we hold up dogged obedience, or bland conformity as the exemplar of the faith. But here in this parable there is no blue print for the servants to follow, no list of instructions about how to invest the money - here it is, do your best... I trust you with my treasure.

And we are left pondering alternate endings to the parable. What if one of the servants who increased the value, or even a fourth character was introduced, who had lost some or even all the wealth. What would have been the master's response. Would they have been treated the same as the one who took no risks? At least he was able to return the one talent. What if the one who started with 5 had to confess, "I lost it all on a venture that turned out badly."