

MATTHEW 25.14-30: THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

[Chelmsford 7 November 2010]

“Once there was a man who was about to go on a journey” (v14).

So begins the parable of the talents.

Nothing is said about where this journey was to be.

- Was the man in question taking some kind of long and exotic vacation?
- Was he about to do the grand tour of the ancient world?

We don't know - and frankly it doesn't matter.

What does matter is that before this rich man set out, *he entrusts to his three servants a considerable sum of money.*

- The GNB speaks of him giving **5000, 2000** and **1000 gold coins** respectively.
- In other older versions we read of him giving **five, two** and **one talents**.

Unfortunately neither translation conveys the enormity of the sum.

As for the NIV note: “A talent was worth more than a thousand dollars”, this is thoroughly misleading.

For 5 talents (or 5000 gold coins) was equivalent to 100 years' wages for a common labourer; 2 talents or 2000 gold coins was equivalent to 40 years' wages; and one talent or 1000 gold coins was worth nearly 20 years wages. *These were enormous sums.*

But - and there is a big BUT - this money was not given to the three servants for keeps. Rather *the money was entrusted to them.*

The money didn't actually belong to them - it belonged to their master.

They were expected to put the money to good use in their master's absence.

After a long time the master returned & called his servants to give an account of their stewardship.

- Two had greatly increased their capital - they doubled their capital. It is plain that they had done this not by passively investing their money, but by going out & actively making money. Like any other entrepreneur, they almost certainly had to *take risks* with their money. Doubtless they made some losses, but overall they made massive profits.
As a result they were commended for their business acumen and were rewarded for their efforts. “**Well done, you good and faithful servant**”, said their master (vv21 & 23).
- The third servant, however, had not been prepared to take any risk with his master's money - instead he had placed the money into the ground for safekeeping. He duly restored to his master the exact sum he had received. But if he had expected praise from his master, he was rudely deceived. “**You bad and lazy servant**” (v26) - ‘*At the very least you should have invested the money in the bank. What a “useless” fellow you are!*’ “**Throw him outside in the darkness; there he will cry and grind his teeth**” (v30). Wow! What a way to end a story. Those who first heard Jesus tell this story must have gasped.

But of course, it is more than a story - it is a parable, and as such it is a story with a heavenly meaning. Indeed, Jesus prefaced the story with the words: “**At that time the Kingdom of Heaven will be like this**” (v14)

So what was Jesus trying to say? Surely, it is this:

- 1) ***God has a claim on our lives*** - he has a claim on your life & on mine. God expects us to use the talents he has given us. ***We are called to be faithful.*** And to be faithful is to be fruitful - it is to be productive in the service of God.

- 2) ***Faithfulness inevitably means taking risks for God.***
Faithfulness in the service of God does not mean minding our ps & qs, it does not mean keeping our nose clean, it means being bold & adventurous for God. It means being creative and imaginative in the way in which we live our lives for God. If God is going to call us “**good and faithful servants**”, then it will be because the Kingdom of God has been advanced as a direct result of the way in which we have used our lives for God

Yes, the general lesson of this parable is chillingly clear. We are called to live our lives by expressing our faith in action. This morning, however, I want to develop the parable by reflecting on what may be meant by the word “**talent**”. In particular I want to suggest that ***God is going to call us to account in three particular areas of our lives.***

1. MONEY

In the first place, God has entrusted each of us with ‘money’. True, we may have earned our money by the sweat of our brow, but in the end what we have in our bank accounts is a gift from God. For the strength, the energy and the intellect which enabled us to earn the cash we have is from God.

In this respect some words of Moses found in Deut 8 are very pertinent: “**Make certain that you do not forget the Lord your God... When you have all you want to eat and have built good houses to live in, and when your ...silver and gold, and all your other possessions have increased, make sure that you do not become proud and forget the Lord your God. You must never think that you have made yourself wealthy by your own power and strength. Remember, it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to become rich**” (Deut 8.11-14,17-18).

This is God’s world - not ours

Everything we have is held in trust - including our money.

- As in the parable, so in life the amount which we have varies: some have five talents, some have two talents, while some have just one talent.
- The salaries we are paid and the savings we amass vary considerably. Some of us are paying tax at the highest rate, some at the lowest rate, while others pay no tax at all.

But, however much or little we earn, all that we have belongs to God and God expects us to use it all for him.

Now, don’t get me wrong. It is obvious that we have got to live. God doesn’t expect us to starve.

There is nothing wrong with a good old shop at Sainsbury's or Tesco's.
BUT God doesn't expect us to squander everything we have on ourselves, or on our families and friends.

The Bible makes it clear that God's people should *give a realistic proportion* of their income to God. Precisely what that proportion should be will vary from person to person – there is no iron rule. The Biblical norm of a 'tenth' is, however, a guideline; for some who are on the breadline that may be impossible; but for high earners, a fifth or even more of one's income might be more appropriate.

At the moment we as a church are facing a particular challenge.

At our church meeting in March we exercised faith by adopting a budget which demanded a 5% increase in giving.

But instead of our giving increasing, our giving has decreased.

At Thursday's meeting of the leadership team our treasurer was telling us that if our giving stays at its present level, then we will end up with a **£37,350 deficit** by the end of March.

This is a very worrying state of affairs.

We recognize that these are tough times.

There is no doubt that some within our church cannot afford to give more. Indeed, those amongst us losing their jobs may well have to give less.

My gut-feeling, however, is that there are some of us who could and perhaps even should give more.

It is possible that some of our members and friends have not given more because they felt the church did not need the money: perhaps some have felt that as a result of the income we gain from letting out our premises we have more than enough.

The fact is that this is not the case: our impending deficit of **£37,350 takes account of the money we receive from lettings.**

This is the time of the year when the treasurer and the finance team begin the work on next year's budget. But how can one construct a budget for the next financial year when we are facing such deficit this year?

Does God really want us to make a drastic cut to next year's budget?

This would have profound implications for our mission to Chelmsford – it would mean having to let go of staff.

Brothers and sisters, we face a major crisis which we will have to resolve.

In the light of this parable, what is God saying to us? To you?

- Maybe some of us need to invest another £1 a week into the church?
- Others of us may believe that God is telling us to invest a further £5, £10, £15 per month into the church.
- Maybe for some of us it may be a more radical step of beginning to tithe – and this may involve investing a further £50 or £100 per month.

It may feel risky giving more at this time of austerity – but surely that is what faith is all about. Faith is about risk-taking – about making sacrifices.

Let me be up front with you: in order to preach this sermon with integrity, I have had to write a letter to the treasurer giving notice that I wish to up my giving.

What kind of *investment* is God calling you to make?

In this respect let me draw your attention to words Paul wrote to the church at Corinth: **“Remember that the person who sows few seeds will have a small crop; the one who sows many seeds will have a large crop. You should each give, then, as you have decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly. And God is able to give you more than you need”** (2 Cor 9.6-7)

When it comes to our use of money, will God say to us **“Well done, you good and faithful servant”**?

That fact is that our talents, represented by the cash we have, have been entrusted to us by God. We have a God-given responsibility to put our money to good use. And as this parable reminds us, one day we shall have to give an account of our stewardship of our money to God

2. OUR GIFTS

A **‘talent’** is literally a sum of money.

But the word **‘talent’** has also a metaphorical sense, and then it means *a natural gift*.

God has given us many & various gifts:

- some have a gift for making music or for writing poetry;
 - others have a gift for teaching or organising;
 - yet others have a gift for knocking a nail squarely on the head or for putting up a shelf;
 - while there are those with the gift of listening or of offering a word of wisdom.
- The list of gifts is endless.

Furthermore, *all of us are gifted*

There is not one useless person amongst us.

All of us have something to offer in the service of God.

True, *some of us are more gifted than others* - there are some who seem to have two if not five talents, while others of us have only one gift.

When I was a student at Cambridge my tutor, Dr Picken, who taught in three different faculties - botany, music & Chinese. He was a real polymath. It was an awe-inspiring experience to have dinner with such a man.

Not all of us can be so gifted.

But we all have at least one ‘talent’ or gift which can be used in the service of God.

Paul put it this way when writing to the church at Corinth: **“There are different kinds of spiritual gifts... there are different ways of serving... there are different abilities to perform service... But it is one and the same Spirit who... gives a different gift to each person”** (1 Cor 12.4-6,11).

What are we doing with the gift(s) that God has given us?

I can guarantee that as a church we can use whatever gift you have to offer

Let me give just four examples of particular areas where help is urgently needed:

- The Oasis Café needs more helpers. What about giving four hours a week to God once a week – or even once a fortnight?
- The Pastoral Team needs more care group leaders: what about giving two hours a week to caring for others?
- Light Factory needs more teachers: what about going on a rota and teaching our children two or three Sundays a month?
- We need two more leaders for the Fusion groups – one male, and in particular one female. Yes, it means staying on after the evening service – but what a difference you could make.

What are we doing for God? Will God be able to say of each one of us, “**well done, you good and faithful servant**”?

One of the lessons of this parable is that our talents, represented by the gifts we have been given, have been entrusted to us by God.

We have, therefore, a God-given responsibility to put our talents to good use.

What’s more, one day we shall have to give an account of our stewardship of our money to God

3. THE GOSPEL

There is a third area of application which is probably truer to the thrust of the parable. For when Jesus told this parable, he did not have in mind people using their money or their gifts for God, but rather the need to tell others of God and his love.

For this parable, like all the other parables, was aimed at Jesus’ contemporaries.

Jesus used this parable to warn Israel’s leaders of God’s judgment that was hanging over them.

It is very likely that the third servant, the lazy scoundrel who did nothing, represents the scribes and the Pharisees.

God had intended the entrusted them with message of his love for the world; but instead of being a “**light to reveal God’s will to the Gentiles**”, they had hoarded away that saving knowledge of God.

They had buried it where not even the ordinary people of Israel could get at it.

They had kept for themselves what was meant for all. And in so doing they had defrauded God - and for this they would have to answer.

Who are the successors of the scribes & Pharisees?

In a sense, we are. For God has entrusted us with the message of his salvation.

Through this parable Jesus asks: “*What have you done with this message of salvation?*”

According to Paul, the Gospel is “**God’s power to save all who believe**” - but is this so? Have we allowed others to know of God’s grace in Jesus Christ, or have we as it were ‘buried’ it?

Listen again to the third servant: “**I was afraid, so I went off and hid your money in the ground**” (v25).

The third servant was not a crook - he didn’t swindle his master.

He was simply afraid to take a risk with what had been entrusted to him.
We have been entrusted with the Gospel. What are we doing with it?
Are we willing to take risks for the sake of the Kingdom?
Or are we afraid, afraid of what others might think if we begin to invite them to our church, let alone tell them of what Jesus means to us.
When it comes to sharing our faith, will God be able to say to each one of us “**well done, you good and faithful servant**”?

That fact is that the message of the Kingdom has been entrusted to us by God.
We have, therefore, a God-given responsibility to share this news with others.
And as this parable reminds us, one day we shall have to give an account of our stewardship of the Gospel to others.
On that day we shall discover that living a Christian life is not sufficient - God expects us to take risks for the Kingdom, not least risks in the way in which we share with others the Good News of Jesus and his love.