

Parable of the Talents

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

November 15, 2020

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

Psalm 90:1-12

1 Thess. 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Years ago I used to attend a church in England, and on the Sunday when this gospel was read, everyone who came to church received a £20 note, the equivalent then of about \$28. Our church had a message for us lucky church-goers: the money we received we were expected to put to some use - either for charitable purposes or to use it to make more money.

About two months later some members of the church stood before the congregation to tell them what they had done to turn their £20 into £30, or however much it was. I remember sitting there feeling guilty for not having turned my £20 into anything. Perhaps I would end up being cast into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Looking back, I think the whole idea was an interesting experiment, since some people relished the challenge and were creative and made something of the £20 they were given. My only reservation is that the amount given to us was too small. If we had each been given £1 million, for example, that would have been another story. Imagine if that was the Sunday you had decided to sleep in and not come to church - wouldn't you be kicking yourself?

Actually the gift of £1 million would have more closely followed the gospel, since the talents the master given to his slaves were no small amounts. How much was a talent? One commentator describes it as the "wage of an ordinary worker for fifteen years." So the slave who was given five talents was entrusted with a considerable sum. By the way, a "talent" is not a coin, but a weight. It could be in the form of copper, silver or gold. Today we've taken the term and expanded its meaning, so that when someone has gifts or natural ability we say that they are "talented."

So let's now consider what this gospel means to us. Like last week's parable about the wise and foolish bridesmaids, this parable is about the return of Jesus: the second coming. In our Eucharistic prayer we say "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." So this is what that last part will be like. In the meantime, we are living in between "Christ is risen" and "Christ will come again."

If we read this gospel in conjunction with the first Letter to the Thessalonians, as the lectionary suggests we do, there is a strong "end of the world" flavor to our readings this morning. Jesus will return at a time when you are not expecting him. As the first letter to the Thessalonians puts it, "For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." Some of those early Christians to whom this letter was written would have expected Jesus to return in their own lifetime. How would we behave if we believed that too? What would we change about what we are doing now, if we knew that Jesus was returning in say, February 2021? The author of the letter to the Thessalonians has some advice for us: "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."

Now let's return to the gospel. In our reading this morning, we hear that the master has "entrusted his property to them." If we assume the analogy of the man who entrusts the property as being God, then it's as though God has said, "what I have I give to you." What amazing generosity! And how like the vows we make when we marry. Now we understand more fully why the kingdom of heaven is often compared to a wedding banquet. God shares what he has with us.

If we compare our relationship to God using the metaphor of a marriage, we can note that in today's gospel the emphasis is not so much on love but on the contractual side of marriage. But to get the full meaning of the reading, we have to go beyond the monetary aspect and consider that God's "property" consists in the talents or gifts we have that can be used to build up the kingdom of heaven. Because if this whole story is about Jesus returning at the end of time, what will he be expecting to find? Not the world as he left it, but a world which is already living in that eternal space where God suffuses and illuminates the whole, where Christians are already making straight the way for Jesus to return.

The thing about talents is that they are God's investments in us. God takes a risk with entrusting his property to us, but in faith he knows that we can make more if we take some risks ourselves. Take the first slave: he was given five talents, and went off and did some business with them, and doubled his investment. And the same thing happened with the slave given two talents. How did they know what to do, I wonder? They probably took time to think about the reason God had given them the talents. Then, after thinking creatively about what to do with them, they put their talents to work.

So what talent, do you think, has God bestowed on you? Those of you of advanced years might be sitting there thinking, I wished I had used my talents better, or I had achieved more. You know that song, "regrets, I've had a few." The young people don't know about all that yet, but the older folks feel it.

I think we need to acknowledge that God in his generosity gives us more talents we sometimes know what to do with. There's a British movie called *Shirley Valentine*, starring Pauline Collins, about a middle-aged woman who goes to Greece on vacation and rediscovers her old self, one she thought she had lost. At the end of the movie the main character asks "why do we have so much unused potential?" That's a hard one to answer.

The fact remains, that all of us, for one reason or another, have talents which are unused or undeveloped. The good news, however, is that it is never too late to use one of your talents - because while we have life we have talents. So think about what *you* have, what more *you* can give, and ask God to show you the way.

I was going to finish my sermon there, but then I remembered about the third slave; you know, the one who took his talent and buried it in the ground. He had his reasons: he told the master "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." Unfortunately, he made a mistake. It wasn't that his reasoning was off, but his premise was wrong. He had this idea of God as being harsh and to be feared and, not wanting to step out of line, he put his talent away in a safe place. But that's not what God wants. The slave's understanding is not who God is. God loves us and believes in us so much that he is willing to

share what he has with us. If we took the example of these three slaves and entered them in the Book of Judgement, what would the reckoning be? You will have to help me with this. Let's start with the first slave: the first entry would be $5+5=?$ Then the second slave $2+2=?$. Then the third slave $1+0=?$ Answer, 0.

The gifts and talents from God are a divine blessing and all who say, "Jesus is Lord", have an obligation to continue the work begun by Jesus. So today consider what you have, whether great or small, and commit yourself to making the best of it. Consider yourself blessed by God, and become a blessing to others. Think in terms of what you can give, rather than what you can take. And may the God of grace multiply your own talents, to his greater glory.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford