

Sermon on Matthew 25: 14-30
The Church Today, Tomorrow, and Forever...

At first glance, this parable, one we're all probably familiar with, seems to suggest everything we wouldn't otherwise associate with the message of Jesus.

I wonder, for instance, how many stewardship campaigns in churches have been launched on the back of this story?

Three servants are given an exorbitant amount of money, and the expectation is that they will increase it and give it back to the master.

I remember watching a service once where the congregation had just sung the hymn we sang before, 'Take My Life'.

The preacher introduced the offering that day by saying, 'We've just sung, take my silver and my gold...', so let's be seen' it then!'

So the parable has been made to be about stewardship of money.

I was sent a joke the other day by a minister friend of mine: 'A church is planning an ambitious building project and the minister stands up in front of the congregation and says, 'I've got good news and I've got bad news.

The good news is we've got more than enough money to complete our new building. The bad news is it's still in your pockets.'

Scandalously, one would have thought, Jesus has the hide to say at the end, 'Those who have, will be given more. Those who do not have, even what they do have will be taken away from them.'

Doesn't exactly seem to fit with 'blessed are those who suffer and blessed are the meek.'

This isn't the good news for the poor and the poor in spirit we're used to hearing from Jesus surely.

What's more even the description of the master is somewhat baffling – he is described as a hard man, harvesting where he has not sown and gathering where he has not scattered seed.

If the master is supposed to represent Jesus in the story in some way, it seems drawing too close an allegory is fraught with theological danger.

Again the picture painted doesn't really seem to fit in with the greater arc of Jesus' character and actions, least of all the self giving of the cross itself which, at this point in Matthew's telling, is coming close.

Then at the end, as we're aware, in a move typical of the way Matthew tells his stories, the unfaithful slave is thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This doesn't sound much like Jesus to us surely?

Where's the love?

The compassion?

The grace?

Seems to have all but disappeared for the moment.

This is a world which sounds much more like the 'get ahead' world we all know today, rather than the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus came to proclaim.

The parable has also been made to be about actual use of, well, our talents.

God has given us talents to use, and we should be using them, not burying them in the ground, and neglecting them.

They should be multiplying the work of the Kingdom around us.

And while we're each given different amounts of talents, we're called to use what we have faithfully in service of God.

You may be saying to yourself, well what's the problem with that?

And you'd be broadly right.

There's no problem with that thought, we certainly should be serving the Lord with our personal gifts.

Paul's metaphor of the body for the church places at least some emphasis on this idea.

None of us are the same, none of us have the same gifts, but together we work in harmony for the Gospel, and so are knitted together as the Body of Christ.

The question here, though, is whether that's really in the first place what Jesus is getting at.

Is this really a strangely embellished object lesson about fulfilling our God given potential?

If it is, one might have thought there would be less complicated ways of saying it.

So, what is it possibly about?

If it's not in the first place about talents in the biblical sense or in the second place about talents in the common English sense, what is it about?

Well, as with everything, we need to read it in its context.

And like every story in the Gospels it has multiple contexts which may influence our interpretation in different ways, with different levels of weight.

There is the context of this point in Jesus' ministry and life – where are we up to in the story and in what scene is this story placed?

The context of Matthew's community some 50 years or so after the resurrection – how and why did Matthew frame this story in this way to speak to his people?

And there is the internal context of the parable itself, in this case the master and his servants, and the entrusting of his wealth to them – all the social, familial, economic mores of the day inform the scene before us.

Reflecting a bit on the frame this story sits in helps us understand it more deeply.

This passage, this teaching, is not a part of some great preaching tour of Jesus.

He's not instructing the crowds at this point.

If we go back to the beginning of chapter 24 in the Gospel where this current discourse began, there we're told, 'As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately... '.

That's the setting.

We're eavesdropping, as it were, on an intimate period of teaching between Jesus and his disciples, his closest followers, not long before his death.

In a very real sense, this is the last real message Jesus will be able to quietly communicate to them before events will spiral out of control and spill into the public arena.

Mark makes this same scene even more private by suggesting it was the favoured four, Peter, Andrew, James and John, who were there alone with Jesus.

The point is it was intimate.

It was for the inner circle.

To those who would become the first leaders of the early church, Jesus sat down and told them straight how things would be.

Their heads, like ours would certainly have been, must have been spinning.

And as we learnt last week reading the parable of the ten virgins, Jesus is here speaking about the Kingdom of Heaven and what it will be like when he returns.

In the last moment of private teaching he has, he speaks to them of the last things, and how to prepare for them.

‘Again, it will be like...’, we read today – future tense, this is what will happen when the Son of Man returns comes back, Jesus is saying with obvious self-reference.

It’s what we call ‘eschatological’, or a teaching about the last things, the final time.

The story itself, though, says something about the time in between, of course.

The master goes on a journey and there are expectations of the servants before he gets back.

It’s about the end times, but it reminds us that the in between time is intimately connected.

What is often called the time of the church, is supposed to bear witness to the coming restoration of all things.

As the community of light and love the church is supposed to pre-empt the end in the here and now.

In other words it’s supposed to bear witness to Jesus in word and deed, in order that the world might believe what it has heard, of a love stronger than death.

That this parable is a message for the church particularly is surely evidenced by its audience in the story – the disciples.

Jesus has already said to Simon earlier on that he shall be called Peter and on this rock I will build my church.

Here are the first leaders of the early church sat down and gathered at the penultimate moment, and Jesus is laying on them the responsibility they will bear following his departure.

Matthew's own context might even suggest a further additional meaning.

Perhaps there were elements of those who had heard Jesus' message in the decades following the resurrection, who would not accept his claims to Messiahship, who might be in view here as the 'third servant' – those burying the divine treasures so that it would not grow??

It's an intriguing thought.

In the first place, though, this teaching of Jesus seems to be about the church and how it is to live with the great wealth it has been entrusted with.

Not actual wealth you'll understand, but rather the wealth of God's gifts which will sustain its life in the in between time we still inhabit today.

This parable is surely about the church of today, and the church of tomorrow, and an encouragement to the church of today, to live in the light of Jesus' tomorrow.

It's about the gift of the Spirit which enlivens and maintains the church's life.

The gift of the sacraments which are visible signs of the Kingdom in our midst.

The gift of preaching and the word we share together.

The gift of ministry in all its forms.

The gift of community and communion with one another and the company of saints who have gone before us.

And maybe the size of the talents, remembering that just one talent was an exorbitant amount of money in those days, let alone five... maybe the size of the talents could be read a little more literally than we're used to doing.

Maybe it's a simple way of saying, whatever the size of the church in any place, whatever the place or make up of any gathering of the people of God, what has been entrusted is of great value - eternal value, and should be used to see the church grow, not put away where it will simply sit and stagnate.

After all, remember it is in Matthew's Gospel we hear Jesus say, 'Wherever 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, there I am among them...'

It's in Matthew's Gospel that following the resurrection Jesus says to these same disciples, 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit... and surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.'

It's Matthew of the four gospel writers who focuses far more heavily on the church itself.

Maybe framing the parable of the Talents as he has, is Matthew's way of saying, whether you're a tiny little gathering in some outpost of the Kingdom, a little country church where farming families gather together week to week, a great, towering city church which sees thousands in attendance, a country church, not unlike ours, you each have a role to play.

You each have huge spiritual wealth to enjoy, gifted to you by the master.

You each have the church in all its fullness.

So, what are you going to do about it?

Are you going to let it grow?

Grow in your understanding of the Gospel, your discipleship of Christ, your love and compassion?

Are you going to welcome people in and make disciples of all nations?

Or are you going to close down, hoard the gifts, and keep them to yourself?

Are you the church of today and tomorrow?

Or do you just live in the present and that's it?

When the disciples first heard this story, surely the full weight of what Jesus was saying couldn't have been apparent to them.

Peter went on to deny Jesus three times, the others fled away.

Yet following God's glorious morning as Jesus was raised from death the church of which we are still a part was started by them all those many years ago.

They used the talents they had been entrusted with faithfully, and we continue to reap the benefit of it.

The question is what will we do with our talents?

What will we do with the gifts of the church which have been entrusted to us in this place, in this time?

Are they just for today, or are they to be used, employed, shared in the light of the master's return tomorrow?

The church, its life, its ministry, has been entrusted to us.

God has shown in Jesus that he is always faithful.

Great is thy faithfulness as the old hymn puts it.

The question is, how faithful are we in response?

Would Jesus come and stand in our midst and say, 'Well done good and faithful servants?'.

The disciples still messed things up as I've said, and no doubt we'll continue to mess things up in different ways as well, God is always forgiving, always loving, always, compassionate.

The cross teaches us that.

But we are called to be the church.

The people of salt and light.

The people of Jesus.

For all the world to see.

This is indeed a sacred vocation.

I love Tuesdays around here.

Pieces and Yarns is on, Men's Coffee, Playgroup, Choir in the afternoon, The Men's Shed going all day, two small groups in the evening in different homes.

People are washing all through the place from 8 in the morning til 4 in the afternoon and beyond.

Engaging and engaged at different points, young and old, no hierarchy, no favouritism.

The Gospel is being shared, mostly in deed, but I imagine in word in subtle ways too.

It's one example of the church being the church, using the gifts it has been given to grow the Kingdom.

There's a good spirit in the place.

Then we gather and worship on Sundays, we share communion, we share the peace of the Lord.

Tuesday and Sunday are always part of the same thing.

They belong together in this adventure called church.

There's always more to do, more to share, the church is never finished in that sense.

There' always more tomorrow for the church.

And it's the tomorrow we need to live for today.

And we pray that by God's faithfulness to us, we might just manage to be faithful in response, with what we have received.

Amen.