

MATTHEW 25: 14-30. THE PARABLE OF THE 'TALENTS'.  
CCO and StJN, 16<sup>th</sup> November 2014.

O God, our Father, we ask that we might hear your word and receive it into our hearts and minds today, through the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

You're probably familiar with this parable, usually referred to as the Parable of the Talents; we find it in Luke's Gospel as well as Matthew's. The Good News Bible translates the word 'talent' as 'gold coins'. Our English word, talent, meaning a particular ability or gifting, actually comes from this parable. Although I don't believe this parable is *really* about what we call our talents, such as being able to bake, or make things, or sing, or suchlike. Yes, these are gifts with which we are to serve God, but the parable goes deeper than that, I think.

The original word 'talent' meant a measure of weight, like a kilogram or a ton. A talent of gold coins would be worth the average labourer's pay for FIFTEEN years! That is a huge amount. I was trying to work out our modern day equivalent: 40 hours' work a week at £10 an hour is £400 a week, or £20,000 a year. So fifteen years' worth of wages would be £300,000 in our money today. That means that the first servant who is given five talents would have got £1.5 million in our day. And even the servant who 'only' gets one talent would have received £300k.

These are extraordinarily large sums of money. So just what is Jesus getting at in this parable? What is clear is that he is NOT telling us that our Western style capitalism is just what God ordered!

Unfortunately, we in the west are now so conditioned to see the world through the lens of unfettered capitalism that it demands some effort to realise that this is NOT what Jesus is trying to get across. This parable is not about money, despite appearances. I am sure of this, because it is well known that the lending of money against interest, otherwise known as usury, was strictly forbidden under Jewish law. Matthew describes the master saying to the slave who had just one talent that he should have taken it to the 'bankers' and at least made some interest on it. These would not have been bankers as we know them of course: the word used here only appears this once in the whole of the New Testament, and it's based on the word 'table', because the money-lenders, like the money-changers, used to sit at tables. You will remember that the first thing Jesus did on arriving in Jerusalem was to *turn over* the tables of the money-changers in the Temple precinct and clear them out. He knew they were fleecing the ordinary people. But now in this parable it appears, at first sight, that the servant is being told off for NOT trying to get interest on the money, that he's condemned for NOT doing something that was against the Jewish law. How do we make sense of that?

It is clear that we have to look for some other interpretation. Jesus has been giving warnings to the leaders of Israel: he can see that they are wrong in their thinking about God, wrong in the way they live, and wrong in making life so burdensome for the ordinary people. In this parable, we can think of the master as representing God, and the servants representing the people of Israel. God has been so amazingly, wonderfully generous to them. They have enjoyed the Covenant, the special relationship between God and his people for centuries; they have been given a home; they have been rescued time and again from their enemies; they have been given the Law, and Wisdom, and faith and hope. They have been taught about justice and love. They have been blessed with all these great riches.

Now we know, from reading the Old Testament, and especially the prophets, that God always intended that Israel, upon whom he showered all these blessings, should use them faithfully and wisely and generously, so that they would be a light for the rest of the world. God had chosen them to be the vehicle for his loving grace, to show the nations how God wants us to live, how he wants the world to be.

It was never God's intention that they should keep all the good things for themselves, shut away from everyone else. They were not supposed to do what the servant with the one talent had done: keep the treasure hidden away, out of sight, where it could neither grow nor change. The religious leaders of Israel had been so concerned that not one minute detail of the Law should be changed that they had, effectively, stifled it, killed all its potential to bring light and life to others. That's why the master in the story is so angry. Jesus is saying that Israel has not been a faithful servant of God.

And what about us? How might this parable apply to us? Well, as Christians, we, like the servants in the parable, have been blessed by God with immeasurable riches: his love, his grace and forgiveness, new life, endless hope, meaning and purpose, the comfort and strengthening of the Holy Spirit, the promise of life with him forever, the joy of knowing that we are his beloved children, the gift of our Lord himself in the Eucharist. Such treasure. Are we to bury it all in the ground? Are we to keep these gifts all shut up inside ourselves? They are not 'ours', are they? They are gifts from God, that we are meant to use, to share, to allow to develop and grow: remember the parable about faith being like a mustard seed, that starts so tiny and grows to be so huge. That's what is supposed to happen with us.

Now, I suspect most of us, if truth be told, are inclined to think of ourselves as being given 'only' the one talent, but even one is huge.

And we notice that Jesus says that the master hands out the talents to each one "according to his ability." That is so reassuring and so important. It means that none of us can say "I haven't got as much as so-and-so, so I can't be expected to do very much". God knows exactly what he can expect from each and every one of us, and he will never ask for more than we are capable of giving. We know that the God Jesus shows us is not like that. He's not out to get us; he's not like some miserable Victorian schoolmaster just waiting to catch us out and find us wanting, so he can punish us.

God is a generous giver. He gives us faith and eagerly waits for us to use his gift, to share it and make it grow. God gives us real treasure, not bling. We don't deserve it, we can't earn it. God gives freely out of sheer love for us, each one of us, whoever we are. What has God given you? What has he done for you? What are you doing with the treasure God has given you?

We in this country are saddled with a bit of a tradition that our Christian faith should be not just a personal matter, but a private matter. That we should keep it to ourselves. To do otherwise is regarded as 'ramming it down someone's throat'. We don't seem to have found a happy medium. But the faithful servants in the parable take their master's gold coins and *trade* with them: they are *out there* in the market place; they engage with the people, with the world around them; they use what they have been given – and it grows! Everyone would know they were servants; everyone would be watching to see what they did with what the master had entrusted to them.

I read recently about a Lutheran Academy in Latvia, which trained new pastors for the church. At interview, the most important question was: "When were you baptised?" A visitor asked why the date of baptism should matter so much, and was told:

“If they were baptized during the period of Soviet rule, they risked their lives and compromised their futures by being baptised. But if they were baptized after liberation from the Soviets, we have many further questions to ask about why they want to become pastors.” In our parable today, the master challenges his servants to live boldly and publicly as his servants, using his resources, unafraid of his enemies, and confident in the future as *his* future. What matters most to the master is not so much the success, as the faithfulness, being ‘faith-full.’

What are we doing with the faith that God has given us? Do we take it for granted? Do we keep it for ourselves? Is it hidden safely away? Or are we taking it wherever we go, sharing it and watching it grow? Are we afraid, or are we bold? It isn't ours just to keep: it is for us to share.

We are so easily discouraged. But we just need to remember what great riches God has given us; we need to focus on what we have received, not on what we don't have. We can remind ourselves that God gives freely and generously, and will never ask more from us than he has already supplied us with. As disciples, we are called to more than just being a nice person; we are called to follow Jesus, to model our lives on his, and he was always proclaiming the Kingdom of God, in one way or another. How do we do that in our daily lives?

You may perhaps be struggling with all of this, wondering whether you've really been given your 'talent', and wondering what treasure you have to share. If that's the case, you might want to talk about things – just ask me, or John when he's back in action, or talk to another Christian. That's what we're here for. And believe me, God doesn't leave anybody out and he doesn't have any favourites. We all come to him empty-handed, he gives as he wills, and we can rejoice that he gives us all that we need to do what he wants us to do. Amen.