

Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost (Matthew 25. 14-30)

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The word 'parable' derives from two Greek words – 'para' meaning 'beside' and 'ballō' meaning to throw or to cast. In rhetoric, a parable is a comparison or fictional story that is 'set beside' reality in order to illuminate some feature of experience. Over and over again in the gospels, Jesus says: 'for it is like ...'; or 'it is as if ...' and we're given a story which offers insight into his understanding of God and of human life in relation to God. So it is in today's gospel reading with the parable of the talents. And yet, with this story it is not so easy to discern exactly what understanding or life lesson we're supposed to draw from it.

Stanley Hauerwas claims that, 'no parable has been more misused than Jesus' parable of the talents'.¹ A brief glance at on-line commentaries on it throws up a vast array of interpretations. Many are not appealing. It can seem to offer (indeed, in the hands of conservative Protestant interpreters it *does* offer) divine legitimation for market capitalism, a system set up so that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer while being blamed all the while for their wickedness and laziness. But I think of those who have been born into privilege, growing up in stable, loving families and given a good education. They have much, and mostly they are given more – a satisfying job, financial security, social status. And then I think of those who have been abused as children or born into poverty or with a disability. They have less, and often lose even what they have as mental illness, homelessness or difficulty in maintaining functioning relationships may leave them isolated, impoverished and with few prospects. This may be a true description of too much in human affairs, but

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 209.

is it the point of today's gospel reading? How could this be a story about the kingdom of God?

Or – an interpretation that has burdened we responsible eldest children over the years – this parable may seem to be asking whether we are doing 'enough' to warrant the blessings we have received, and so provoke anxiety and tendencies to workaholicism and works' righteousness. Somehow I need to make a big enough difference in the world to 'justify' the gifts I have been given – for, as it is written in Luke's treatment of this same story, 'from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded' (Luke 12. 48). And while there is clearly something that seems right about this, it can become a heavy burden which is not entirely consistent with the promise of joy and abundance that is also a feature of the story.

So, what other ways of reading this parable, what other ways of setting it alongside reality, are possible? The story, as recounted in Matthew's gospel, comes as part of a series of illustrations about the nature of the judgement of God and the shape human life must take in the light of that promised judgement. Prior to this, there was a parable focusing on the treatment of his fellow slaves by the slave entrusted with the master's household; then followed the parable of the ten bridesmaids emphasising the necessity of readiness – which I last week explored in terms of faithful expectancy or hope. The parable of the talents, which comes next in this series, seems then to be about responsibility for fruitfulness and participation in the work of the master.

But, and this is crucial, this participation is deeply affected by how the master is imagined to be. The determining feature of the behaviour of the third slave, who hides his one talent and refuses to 'play', is that he fears the master, imagining him to be 'a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed'. This way of imagining the master, and relatedly himself, paralyses his participation – and isn't the same true for us? How we imagine ourselves and how

we imagine reality is powerful. A sense of ourselves as inadequate or unworthy, for example, or of reality as threatening or unfair profoundly affects whether we will risk ourselves to participate in life or not.

Yes – but wasn't the poor third slave perfectly justified in his fear? He fails to produce and the master confirms his view ('You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?'), and has him thrown into 'outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. 25.26, 30). Well – at this point, we are faced with two issues I think.

One is the theological question of whether this kind of violent apocalyptic language attributed to Jesus is to be taken literally or is more like a rhetorical convention associated with the theme of judgement. Or – to put it another way – the question is whether our 'eschatology' – our vision of the final shape of things – has to be consistent with our 'Christology' – our vision of the person of Jesus. It will come as no surprise to you to hear that my answer to that question is 'yes' – it does have to be consistent! And if Jesus is born as one of us, coming vulnerably 'to share our common life'; if Jesus allows himself to be put to death, rather than be complicit in the violent mechanisms of this world; if the risen Jesus returns to his disciples breathing peace and bringing forgiveness, then I don't see the final mode of God's judgement contradicting all that.

Theologian James Alison has argued that what we have in the residual 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' passages such as today's, is the slow subversion and transformation of a pre-existing apocalyptic imagination of judgement in the wake of Jesus' own imagination of God.² This is an understanding of God, who as 1 John puts it, 'is light', in whom 'there is no darkness at all' (1 John 1.5). In other words, the rhetoric in Matthew has not fully caught up with the new revelation of God in Jesus. If something like this is right, then for the purposes of interpreting our parable – the

² James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 124ff.

'fate' of the third slave is described hyperbolically in terms of punishment, but is essentially concerned with his self-exclusion from the 'joy of the master' by his own frightened imagination.

Which us brings us back to the question of imagination, and the recognition that our openness to the kingdom of God is connected to how much we dare to accept the invitation to participate in what the master has initiated, to risk what we have been given. Hauerwas writes that 'the slave with one talent feared losing what he had been given, with the result that he tried to turn the gift into a possession. In contrast, the first two slaves recognized that to try to secure the gifts they had been given means that the gifts would be lost'.³

Often, it feels as though our fears, all the things that hold us back from giving ourselves to life *are* justified – just as the third slave felt as though his fear of the master was justified. We *have* experienced hurt and rejection; we *have* failed and been inadequate; we *have* been unlucky and without opportunity. Yet the question remains: will we let these experiences determine the way we will be? Remember this is a parable about how to live in the time opened up by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Whether our fear of life and of God seem to us justified by past experience, the question Jesus puts to us even so is – will you play? Will you take a risk? Will you accept the invitation, as fully as it has been given to you to do so, to 'enter into the joy of your Master'?

In practice, we might begin simply by recognising and acknowledging where we are withheld and fearful, where we are more seeking to secure what we have than asking what we might give ourselves to, for the sake of the whole. Poet David Whyte said: 'The price of our vitality is the sum of all our fears'. Jesus came to liberate us from fear, so that all of us may have life and have it in abundance. Dare we receive, dare we multiply this gift?

³ Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 210.