Sermon for 33rd in Ordinary Year A

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

i

The *Parable of the Talents* contains a huge shock which would have caused ripples throughout Jerusalem and beyond within the Jewish community – but it is a shock that we do not feel today and which most of us are unaware ever existed.

A shocking twist to a familiar tale or sudden repudiation of a common expectation of behaviour was a technique used by Rabbis to make their moral point memorable through a highly colourful story. Jesus uses this technique himself and speaks of plucking out your eye or chopping off your hand, or of *s*elling off all your wealth to buy a field, or stories of a Samaritan helping a Jew by the roadside and sons asking for their inheritance even before their father has died.

The *Parable of the Talents* was a similar shock to those who first heard it.

Today we are used to the idea of making money, increasing wealth, or seeking profit. We expect GDP to rise over the years. We expect people will strive to do well for themselves. But this is not the tradition of the bible.

The Jewish understanding of the world was that there was only so much wealth in the world and God had decreed who would get the bigger slices and who the smaller. To strive to increase your share was tantamount to thieving it from someone else, because God had decided the social rank of society between peasant and lord and because they had no concept that new wealth could be created and distributed in a new way.

So you can imagine the shock when Jesus told a parable about people who were expected and rewarded by their Master for doubling the size of their allocated talents. Even the Master is said to harvest where he has not sown and to gather where he has not scattered. Only the servant who buried his talent in the ground for safekeeping was actually acting in the correct and moral way according to strict Jewish custom – for even lending his money to a bank to receive interest from other people’s borrowing was supposedly against the Law. Yet the Master not only commends the two servants who have amassed such wealth, the servant who has abided by the Law and returned his Master’s wealth intact is condemned for being lazy and loses even what he had.

ii

The bible has strict rules about wealth, money, debt and interest payments.

The Law states several times, the need for repetition revealing how difficult it was to impose such a rule, that a Jew should not lend to a fellow Jew and expect interest (Exodus 22.25; Lev 25.36; Deut 23.19). Only when lending to non-Jews was interest permitted.

Prophets came along and denounced frequent and abusive transgressions of this law, but it was so difficult to impose that other rules are found in the bible which try to regulate commercial practices, so that at least no essential household item could be demanded in surety and it was illegal to keep a man’s cloak overnight as security against a debt.

The reason behind such attitudes towards debt and interest payments is that debt could easily lead to slavery if the debt could not be repaid. This happened, but it offended the religious leaders because they argued that Jews should never be put into slavery since God had already taken the trouble to release them from Egyptian slavery.

However, debt and debtors were a fact of Jewish society, like any other and the powerful abused the poor in the usual way. The Jews at least had a theoretical way of making sure things never got too far out of hand by having a Year of Jubilee when everything was supposedly returned to original owners so that society could start off again on an even playing field. It was probably never more than a theory, how could such a policy be enacted (?), but it does exhibit their deep seated fear of debt and interest payments and their belief that getting richer was only possible at the expense of others.

The details of Jesus’ parable, therefore, are supposed to be shocking – but the parable is not about commending greed, denouncing the poor as lazy or promoting a capitalist economy. The point is that **spiritual talents** should not be treated in the same way as economic talents.

When God assigns spiritual talents to us, we are supposed to seek to increase them, to develop and grow them. There is no set spiritual hierarchy which assigns us our fixed station in the spiritual kingdom of God, but each one of us is expected and encouraged to grow our spiritual treasures as much as we can. There is no social barrier in the Kingdom of God that demands we ‘know our place’. Even the greatest sinner can become the greatest saint. There is no finite supply of love or holiness. Such wealth can be created from naught.

iii

So what are the implications of Jesus’ teaching about spiritual talents?

There are three levels at which we might address that question. Firstly, the parable addresses the present moment in history when Jesus came to see what the people of God had done with the spiritual talents God had entrusted to them over the centuries.

They had treated their spiritual treasures is if they were economic talents. It might be alright to bury economic talents in the ground to preserve them, but it certainly wasn’t what God expected them to do with their spiritual treasure. They had been called to make the descendants of Abraham a blessing to all nations of the earth, yet they had used the Law to exclude foreigners and keep the Good News of God’s love safely locked away where others could not reach it. Increasing the love of God is a good thing.

Secondly, the parable addresses the situation we all face when our Master shall demand to know what we have done with our spiritual talents. In this way, the parable does also have an eschatological dimension. It is for this reason that the lectionary compilers have coupled this parable with the passage from 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 which speaks of eschatological matters. Paul urges Christians to be alert and not fall asleep in the darkness of the world. The light of the gospel is dawning and Christ will expect to see what we have done with the spiritual treasure of the gospel we have received. Whether the world knows it or not, we will each have to give an account of ourselves one day. So let us live in this dark world in anticipation of the day that will surely come.

Thirdly, this passage addresses all humanity about the spiritual talents, in the widest sense of that term, which have been bestowed upon humanity. How well, for instance, have we cared for the earth which sustains us? How well have we permitted women, or certain social classes or ethnic groups the opportunities to express and fulfil their God-given human potential? How well have we guarded against the danger that so concerned the Jews of biblical times that some people get rich at the expense of others becoming poor?

I think that when the day of reckoning comes, there will be plenty to be said on all accounts by each and every one of us.

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