

Joining with Jesus on his mission

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Pentecost + 25a The Parable of the Talents – Matt 25 14-30

Australia's got talent, Britain's got talent – people say there's a lot of virtue in putting your talents to use. I suspect that attitude has its cultural roots in years of preaching on today's Parable of the Talents. It's easy to assume that the meaning of this parable is to use your personal talents; your special abilities. But it's not what Jesus meant. In Greek (τάλαντον the word we translate as 'talent'), the literal meaning is a monetary unit – enough silver to pay a day labourer for 16 – 20 years.

So given the life expectancy back then, the slave entrusted with five talents had a few lifetimes' worth of wages in his hands. What can so much money have to do with the Gospel? What can such riches possibly represent? A convincing reading of this parable is that it's about Jesus entrusting the spread of the Gospel to the disciples after his resurrection. ^{Matt 28.18-20} So the talents represent the inestimable treasure of the Gospel. The man's return then represents Jesus' second coming, and the disciples are measured by the fruits of their mission. ^{(Barclay}

Matthew II 375ff)

Jesus told this parable to his disciples sitting on the Mount of Olives. ^(Matt 24.3) They'd have been looking out over the Temple which was controlled by the religious authorities? Not long before, Jesus had denounced the scribes and Pharisees for 'locking people out of the Kingdom of heaven.' ^(Mt 23.13) Is that what the third slave represents; taking the treasure of God's trust and, like the scribes and Pharisees, fearfully burying

it away to keep it safe and pure? Burying the Gospel deprives people who might be nourished and strengthened by it.

Is there support in the text for this interpretation? Yes. When we read about the first and second slaves, it says that they went and traded and *made (ekerdesen) more talents*. ^{vv.16-17} The word, *ekerdesen* – translated here as ‘made’ – is used earlier in Matthew’s Gospel to speak of regaining or winning back a community member who sins against you ^{18:15}. So yes, it’s reasonable to see this parable as emphasizing the proclamation of the Gospel to win people to Christ. Those Temple authorities over the valley hid God’s love behind purity laws. This parable says that’s crazy.

One commentator described the folly of their attitude pretty bluntly: *Israel was charged to be a blessing, not a museum*. ^{(LC}

McGaughey in JBL 94 pp235-45) What we have in the Gospel is a treasure which grows when it is shared. It grows any who receive it. It’s the love of God for all families of Earth. That’s what the third slave hid away.

Jesus knows his time is nearly up, and in these final chapters, he gives his disciples a series of warnings, through prophecies and parables. He wants us to be ready for what’s to come. Anyone who stands for the things that Jesus stands for will risk the same persecution he suffered – but we are also promised the same rising! So in this parable, Matthew is challenging his community, and all who come after them, that we must not be as blind and fearful as that third slave was. We are to know enough of the character and hope of our Lord Jesus that we will take risks.

This parable is about joining with Jesus on his mission – continuing his mission. It’s about being God’s true people; about being the means of God blessing for every family of the earth. So what do we do next?

One thing this parable tells us is that we need to recognise the inestimable gift that God has entrusted to every individual in our community. That is the Good News of God's intention to bless every family of Earth – first proclaimed in the call to Abraham and Sarah. ^{Gen 12.1-4} This is why we read the scriptures together, over and over, generation after generation. It's why we search their meaning and uncover the challenges they put before us. We are entrusted with an inestimable treasure, and what we do with that trust matters to Jesus, and it matters all families of the Earth.

What should the Church, entrusted with Christ's Gospel as we are – what should we be doing with it? I think the passage which follows today's parable – and which we'll be reading next Sunday – gives us clear starting directions. It's about the last judgement. Listen to what Jesus says: ³⁴ *Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;* ³⁵ *for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,* ³⁶ *I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*

Jesus sees everyone – particularly the hungry, the thirsty, the outsider, the naked and the imprisoned – Jesus sees himself in every one of these. It's compassion; it's the golden rule – do unto others. In this land at the moment, the opposite is raging, and we feel powerless to oppose it. But we're not. The cost of hiding the treasure is there for all to see in this country's ongoing crises: the plight of the poor, abuse of women, of Aboriginal people, of incarcerated children, of refugees, of our disappearing wildlife and their habitats. We hold the Good News of a totally different world. Tell it and face danger, but Jesus' parable tells us to risk it. Amen