
What Do You Take Me For?

Matthew 25. 14-30

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 13 2005 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

There are two conventional ways of reading the parable of the talents. The first is to say that the talents mean talents – that they refer to human abilities. The conventional sermon goes, ‘People of Duke University, your college has this week been named as the eleventh finest in the world. You are clearly the slave with the five talents. Your job is to go from this place and use your talents to the finest, and your accomplishments will make God very happy.’

The second conventional way of reading the parable is to say that the talents mean money. The corresponding sermon goes, ‘Money won’t help you if you keep it under your bed. Go out and make more money, and the more you make the more you’ll be able to give away.’

It’s not too difficult to see why these kinds of interpretations are reassuring on a cultural context like Duke University Chapel. Those of us who are part of the University are always open to being reminded that we are, when all is reckoned up, extraordinarily gifted. And those of us who have more than enough money are always eager to hear a message that proclaims that the best thing to do with lots of money is to make more. The only real problem with such readings of Matthew 25 is that they seem to leave aside what Jesus is saying in favor of what we want to hear.

I’m going to look at what Jesus is saying by looking at the parable in four scenes. Scene 1 is before the man leaves for the journey. Scene 2 is what happens while he is away. Scene 3 is what happens when he gets back. And Scene 4 is what happens to the third slave.

This is the second of three parables that make up Matthew 25. There is story of the bridesmaids sleeping when the bridegroom comes later than expected. There is story of the Son of Man sitting on the throne and finding that some have not recognized him in the face of the hungry, the naked, the sick and the prisoner. And in between is this story what happens when the property-owner comes back and finds what the slaves have done with the money. And just as the bridegroom in the first story and the Son of Man in the third story are both Jesus, so the slave-owner in the talents story is Jesus.

Why does this matter? It matters because it shows what’s wrong with the ‘You’re all very talented’ interpretation of the parable. This isn’t a story about what God the Father does in creation – dishing out good looks to one and basketball skills to another. Rather this is a story about what Jesus gives his disciples before he leaves them. It also shows us what’s wrong with the ‘get money and give money’ interpretation. Because even the most dyed-in-the-wool capitalist would have to agree that the notion of Jesus preparing to leave the disciples and saying, ‘Here guys, I’m giving you a few million bucks – that should see you through for a bit’ is absurd.

These talents are not natural abilities or big bucks but particular gifts suited to the time between Jesus’ first coming and his second. Paul talks about these kinds of gifts in several places in his epistles. He talks of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, tongues and many others. Matthew’s perspective is more concrete. When Jesus breaks bread at the Last Supper, Matthew is describing how the Eucharist will continue to sustain the Church. When Jesus on the Mount of Olives tells his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, Matthew is describing how baptism will make the Church. When Jesus portrays how to be reconciled with one’s brother or sister, Matthew is describing how admonition, repentance and forgiveness will constitute the Church. What Paul and Matthew are both fundamentally talking about is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the talent Jesus leaves the Church for the time until he returns. So this parable is not telling us how to come to terms with the fact that we are super talented or super rich. It is telling us that, in giving us the Holy Spirit, Jesus has left the Church all the gifts it needs for the time between his first coming and his second, and that we must use those gifts or we’ll be in big trouble.

So in Scene 1 the disciples learn all they need to know. Jesus is soon going to go away, which seems like bad news; but he is entrusting them with everything that is his, which sounds like quite a lot. They are his slaves. Read through the lens of the American South, this sounds like terrible news, news of racism, humiliation, brutality, indignity, despair, segregation, shame. But read as God's word, to say we are Jesus' slaves means we belong wholly to Jesus, which is wonderful, fantastic news. It means human nature and destiny are God's problem, not ours. What a relief that is. Moving to the distribution of talents, I don't think it makes sense to dwell too much on the significance of five, two and one. What the variable distribution tells us is that Jesus does not give us more than we can cope with and that it is not a competition. There is no suggestion that the slave with five talents is better or more important than the slave with two. And don't forget that a talent was a colossal sum, maybe a million dollars in our money. Even the slave with one talent had way more than enough.

So the slave-owner is Jesus, and the slaves are the disciples, and the talents are the gifts Jesus gives the disciples to advance and sustain God's reign in the time between the times, and these gifts are way more than enough. Some disciples received exceptional gifts – two talents. They were able to prophesy maybe, or to speak in tongues or utter words of knowledge. They put these gifts to good use, shaping communities and living sacrificial lives that brought others to faith and made the kingdom known far and near. Some disciples received even more exceptional gifts – five talents. They were able to heal people, and shape communities of transformation that brought the heart of Christ's ministry into situations of conflict and oppression, setting people free and bringing about forgiveness and reconciliation. But some disciples just received the standard issue gifts – one talent – your everyday gifts of Jesus like baptism, the Eucharist, the reading of Scripture and personal prayer.

For some reason, and this is a mystery, the ones who just received the standard issue gifts didn't use them. That's the shock that we get in Scene 2. We may say, 'Wasn't it lucky that the first two slaves got a healthy return on their investment – I wonder how they knew which brokers to deal with and whether the Dow Jones was looking promising each morning.' But not if we remember that these slaves have spent quite a lot of their lives with this master. How do we know that? Because the master is Jesus, and the slaves are the disciples, and this parable comes right at the very end of Jesus' ministry, by which time the disciples have seen the length and breadth and height and depth of what God has been doing in Jesus. The way they use their massive gifts from Jesus, in other words the Holy Spirit, is by doing the things he did, spending time with the people he spent time with, breaking bread with notorious sinners and washing the eyes of the blind. To say two talents made two more talents is not to say the disciple made it big on the ecclesiastical stock market and set up a megachurch in Arizona. Remember Jesus is portrayed as the super-rich master who has all these massive resources to give away. But we know what standards of success Jesus lived by. So success for the disciples means success in imitating Jesus. The one who was given some of Jesus' gifts looked rather like Jesus. The one who was given a lot of Jesus' gifts looked a lot like Jesus.

Come Scene 3, when the master returns, we find that imitating Jesus was just what Jesus wanted. Jesus says, 'You spent a lot of time with me to learn how I do business. I gave you these gifts so you could do business the way I do business. And you have, with the same result. Well done.' But then it comes to light that the third slave, who was given all the gifts Jesus bestowed upon the Church, just not the special gifts, has done nothing with them. Jesus is bewildered. 'You never realized that the Eucharist was a meal where all kinds of people could gather round my table, rich and poor, women and men, skilled and unskilled, academic stars and those with special educational needs, black, Hispanic, Asian, Caucasian, all of them bringing different things to the table and each receiving back the same?' 'I guess not.' 'You never realized that baptism was the moment when all your foolishness and pride, all your evil and malice, could be washed away and you could be incorporated into the way God is redeeming the world?' 'Nope.' 'You never realized that reading Scripture invites you into a constant discovery of God's character and a revelation of the way God has already redeemed the world?' 'Uh – uh' 'You never realized that in prayer you could open your whole heart to God and find that he opens up his whole heart to you?' 'Errr... no.'

And now at last we can begin to make sense of Scene 4, with its wailing and gnashing of teeth. Can't you imagine Jesus' reaction his disciple? 'I don't believe this! You spend three years with me traipsing round Palestine. You see the way I share food with the outcast and bring all around my table. You see the way I

transform people and give them possibilities they never dreamed of. You see the way I fulfill all the promises of God to his people. You see the way I open out a way to the Father that makes eternal life possible to all people. And then I give you all the gifts you need to establish and sustain this life after I've gone. But you don't. And now I'm back you're saying it's *my* fault. You have made up this story that I am a cruel master who reaps where I haven't sown. What are you saying? You yourself have witnessed me sowing seed everywhere I have gone, offering every person I have met the opportunity to enter the kingdom of God. What do you take me for? You are making up a story that is the absolute opposite of the truth for which I have laid down my life, and you are using that story to justify your astonishing laziness. I have told you, I have shown you, and I have empowered you, but you have blocked your ears, closed your eyes, and folded your arms, and made up a story about me to excuse it all.'

I have gone through the parable in detail because I have met so many people for whom this has become the most significant story in the whole Bible. They are people who are deeply aware of their own social advantage and look to the Bible to teach them how to use such privilege without feeling guilty all the time. Maybe you are one of them. If you are I have news for you. This parable is not fundamentally about you. It is about Jesus. It is telling us that Jesus is not a cunning manipulator, who gives us mysterious talents and then lies in wait to see whether we fail to use them properly. No, Jesus is a boundlessly generous friend who goes away and gives us far more than we want or need to imitate him in his absence. If we assume he is a generous friend we will experience the miracle and abundance of life in the Spirit. If we take him for a cunning manipulator we shall experience life as miserable scarcity.

So this is what the parable means for us. Jesus has told us and shown us everything he means by Church and kingdom. The Church is the way he works through the ministry of those who seek to follow him, and the kingdom is the way he works in spite of the many failures of the Church. But, for the moment, Jesus is gone. Before he left he empowered his Church with all the gifts it needed to obey his teachings and imitate his ministry. To some members of his Church he gave exceptional gifts, to others just the regular gifts like prayer, Scripture, baptism and Eucharist. What he wants us to do is to use the gifts he gives us, and if we do so we will succeed in the only way that matters – we will end up looking and living like him. But what we can't do is just neglect these wonderful gifts he has given us to shape Church and kingdom. To justify doing so we would have to make up some false story that either Jesus hadn't given us these gifts or that he will reject us on some other grounds. Such a story is a lie. It is making Jesus into a monster. It is such a cruel, malicious and self-serving lie, that if we start spreading such a lie about we shall have to be stopped in case those who have not met Jesus might come to believe it.

For in the end the real mystery about this parable is not why Jesus gives us gifts, or why he gives us each different gifts, or why he goes away, or how the first two slaves knew what to do. The real mystery of this story is how someone who had seen Jesus lay down his life, had heard his words, had received his invitation, had been empowered with his gifts and sent forth into his kingdom, could ever take him for a distant, cruel or merciless master. In the end it comes down to what kind of God we believe in. Jesus says, 'I have given you everything you need to walk in my ways until I return. I have told you, shown you and empowered you. Trust me, and use what I have given you. I will never let you down. What do you take me for?'