

It is easy to sympathize with the third man in Jesus' parable of the Talents (Matthew 25.15). Here is an insignificant little man, not highly thought of by his master, so he is only given one talent "in proportion to his ability" (v12). His slave-like mentality makes him scared of his master. So when he is entrusted with a large amount of money (a talent being more than £1,000 today) he is so frightened of losing it that he buries it. Just like a dog burying a bone. Then he is blamed by his master for not increasing it. Not only that, but everything is taken away from him and he is banished into outer darkness and loneliness. It might seem Christian-like to feel sorry for him but, if we do, we have missed the whole point of the story.

It is fairly certain that the people Jesus had in mind were the Scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of Israel. So in contemporary terms, it is addressed to the religious leaders of the church today. The scribes were the custodians of the scriptures and religious laws. They kept a tight rein on the Jewish religion, hedging it in with complex rules and regulations, keeping it away from outsiders. They became the bitterest opponents of Jesus, because he refused to be hemmed in by religious laws. He would not hoard his religion, but shared it with all and sundry - even with sinners and Gentiles! The scribes like the third servant buried their talent, their treasure of the knowledge of God, refusing to circulate it to the outside world. So Judaism shrank, and its talent or treasure was given to the Christian Church.

The Christian Church grounded in the wider vision of Jesus and his disciples, has shared its talent with the world. But the parable holds a warning for us. We as a church can hoard our faith, or force it into a mould. We can keep at bay all that we imagine would defile it. This is rigorism. But rigorism with the enforcement of rules to guard our faith is no preservative of faith. If we bury it or hem it in, it will die! The only preservative for Christian faith is to exercise it to meet people's needs and to spread it far and wide in missionary evangelism. The church must trade with the talents that God has lent it, and make them grow.

This is a risky business, as some of our present-day difficulties show. For example, if we take the gospel to the people of Asia and Africa, telling them that God is the God of love, and that *all* men and women are his children, then we must expect them to believe us. So it is not surprising if those same coloured people seek equality with the whites. Particularly when they realise that the Jesus whom we venerate was an Asian. This is a problem for us, but also for those Asians who cannot understand why we do not practice what we preach.

But today I am only speaking of sharing our faith; not with the way we solve our social problems. The colour problem is too complex to have only one answer. But the gospel message of true love to God and to our fellow humans, gives us a yardstick by which to measure solutions to our daily problems. If we measure our words and actions against the life of Jesus and the will of God, with the help of the Holy Spirit we can find a solution to most problems. Even if the immediate needs of the individual have to be subservient to the needs of society. That the solution is not easy, nor the

one we would expect, can be seen from that powerful answer of Jesus: “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s”.

The church’s duty is to share the gospel with all mankind, and hope that it will be practised. But the main application of the parable is to the individual Christian. The individual must not hoard his or her faith; nor bury it in the ground. Yet this happens. I know someone of great wealth who prays regularly, reads her bible daily, and uses her money to support a church that gives her the type of worship she wants. But she has little contact with others and is preserving a brand of faith which is isolated from outside influences. She gives none of her Christian faith to others. Obviously that does not apply to any of you! Yet to a lesser extent some of us may be spiritual hoarders. It is tempting to come to church, to pray, to worship and to listen to God’s word, almost in isolation from others in the congregation and then to go through the rest of the week without sharing that gospel with others. I know, because this was a picture of me 70 years ago.

But the Christian faith must not be locked behind closed minds. There is no profit in acknowledging God in isolation from others. We must continually move amongst people sharing our faith with them and learning from them. We must seek to understand, to apply, and to revise, what they hold and what we hold. For to bury our brand of faith in the earth for fear we lose it, is the quickest way to forfeit it. It must be put into circulation.

St Paul reminds us that each member of Christ’s body has his or her own gifts and function, given to them by God for the building up of the church and the gospel. He says that some of us are called to be prophets, others teachers, and so on. Is everyone using their gifts as they ought by their words and works, witnessing to those they seek to serve? Or are we by timidity, by faithlessness, failing the God who made us; and the Lord who died to redeem us? This is the question the parable should make each of us ask ourselves today. Do others in my workplace, my leisure area, even my home, know that I am a member of the Christian Church? Or is that a part which is kept closely guarded in my heart?

No wise person will bury his or her faith. Misers and hoarders are always little people. But true Christian stature is to hold the faith with all our strength; and then to mix with others, even those of differing schools of thought. For by sharing our faith with others, and by sharing the faith of others, both will grow.

None of us knows when our Master will call us to give an account of our stewardship of this life. On the day of reckoning none of us will want God to call us “a wicked and lazy servant”. To avoid that we need to ‘be prepared’ now, like the Boy Scouts’ motto, or like the wise virgins. Not unprepared like the foolish ones.