

At first, the explanation of today's gospel story seems very straightforward. We recall the pun on the word talent – it represents both a large sum of money, and also our skills or abilities. God gives each of us talents in the sense of skills, and we are to use them according to our abilities. As Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthians, “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. Each person is given these gifts for the common good. Some are teachers, some are healers, some are prophets, and so on.” So, in Jesus' parable, the slaves (probably senior people such as stewards) were given certain responsibilities while the master was away, according to their abilities. The ones entrusted with five and two talents used them wisely (meaning energetically or fruitfully). They achieved much in their master's absence. We do not know how these two doubled their money; we only are told that “at once” they started working with what they had been entrusted. They were invited to join the heavenly realm.

The slave entrusted with only one talent was criticized because he (I assume they are all 'he') did not use the talent that he had been given. He hid it in the ground, literally or figuratively. He was not invited to the heavenly banquet, but cast into the outer darkness. It was not good enough that he returned the money/talent entrusted to him. What was his problem? Was he lazy or just unimaginative? Was he concerned that he would be punished if he invested the money unsuccessfully and had to return less than he had been given? What kind of reception would he have got from the master?

Underlying the story is how the three slaves related to their master. We perhaps infer that the master was an astute business man. The two entrepreneurial slaves thrived in that environment, and were successful. The third slave feared the master as a rapacious person who reaped where he did not sow. He could not see beyond this, to the fact that to have been entrusted with even one talent was an enormous privilege (my reading set the value of one talent as 20 years' wages for a daily labourer). So if we conflate back the idea of talent = money to talent = skills, we see that the master (God) expects us to use our talents/skills for the building up of the Kingdom here on earth, and not just sit on our hands.

But equally, we see that there are two aspects to our attitude. One is our own tendency to be active rather than passive in how we relate to the world and to other people. Are we inclined to step forward when something needs to be done, or do we wait for someone else to do the job? But even more important is that if this parable is really about God as the master, how do we view God? Let's use God the Father as our image for this purpose. Is God for us a father figure who encourages us and is prepared to support us in our endeavours, even when we try our best but are not successful? Or do we view God like a judgemental and unforgiving father who is constantly on the look-out to criticize our every mistake?

My instinct is to cut the third slave a bit of slack. Maybe he didn't show a whole lot of initiative, but he feared retribution if he failed. So he took what seemed like the prudent route. He hid his talent, and expected that at least he would get credit for returning it unused. His attitude was shaped by his perception of the master. A Christian's attitude will be shaped by his or her perception of God.

This is where the parable has resonance for me. I have long been critical of the strain of Christianity that focusses on sin, because it seems to promote an understanding of a God who is continually monitoring our every action to say 'gotcha' when we make a mistake. It all ties back to the notion of

Original Sin, in the versions expounded by St Paul in the letter to the Romans, and later by Augustine of Hippo. According to these writers, the disobedience of Adam regarding God's command not to eat from the fruit of the tree of good and evil has been passed down to each and every one of us. It is a theology that sees each of us as incorrigibly evil and unworthy, always prone to make the wrong choice in any moral or ethical matter. If that is what you believe then, believe me, you had better fear God! Your only hope is that God will graciously choose to overlook your innate sinfulness on Judgement Day.

To which I respond, "What kind of a father figure is that?" Tyrannical, overbearing, and unloving. It is the God-image that has driven so many people out of the Church. I think that it was John Spong who wrote that he had met many people during his ministry who had told him that they do not believe in God because God is so unforgiving and judgemental. To which Spong replied, "I do not believe in that God either." Neither do I.

You may have noticed these past several weeks (it's hard not to!) that Matthew seems to be fixated on the end of the age, and what is needful to be admitted to God's presence in the afterlife. We see the same theme in today's reading from Paul's letter to the church he had founded in Thessalonika. "The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night – keep awake if you want to live with Christ!" That idea was very relevant in the 1st century but less so for us today. First century Jews, including Matthew and Paul, expected the end of the present age to be imminent, with God's rule of justice to replace the inequities and inequalities of society. These had been exacerbated by the Roman occupation, and in Matthew's case, by the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. For Christians, the Jewish idea of the end of the present age became conflated with the Second Coming of Jesus. Since Jesus, Son of God, had been crucified in this life, surely he must soon return to inaugurate God's Kingdom on earth. So when Matthew told his stories about Jesus, he put the gloss on them that believers must be always on their toes for the Second Coming/end of the age.

Let's face it. Matthew and Paul were wrong. Jesus did not return within a few years of his death. Most of us do not expect the end of the age to come imminently. Jesus might return tomorrow, but the experience of two thousand years makes me not want to hold my breath. That means that we read these stories of Jesus in a more relaxed way. As you know, my reading of them differs from that of Matthew. Matthew expected God to come and establish the new age. I believe that it is up to us to do so.

I have a hope and a dream for our parish of St George's. I want our Sunday worship to be joyful, not a weekly experience of being beaten up spiritually because of the angst of Matthew and Paul. I want every one of us to know – to really know – that as part of God's Creation, we are "very good", even if we cannot achieve perfection! With that assurance under our belts, I want us to be able to use our God-given skills/talents to the best of our ability, knowing that all God requires of us is that we do our best, whether we are successful or not.

We are a small parish, but I believe that we can truly be the "Light to the world" that Jesus Christ calls us to be, if we can promote a positive image of Christianity. Please do your best to spread that message of just how exhilarating and affirming that belief can be. I continue to hope and pray that we can bring new disciples to Jesus here at St. George's. This is not some sappy message of "Jesus loves you" but the realization that we are all valued and valuable both in and because of our wonderfully different spiritual gifts – as St Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthians, "We are One Body with many members."