

Mt. 25.14-30; 1 Thess. 5.1-11; Zephaniah 1.7, 12-18 (end)
2nd Sunday before Advent 19th November 2017;
St. Andrew's, Totteridge 8 & 10am 3rd Sunday All-Age

May the Lord now be in all our hearts, and upon my lips, that every thought & word may be wholly for the honour & glory of his name. Amen.

We are familiar with how the *Parable of the Talents* asks a fundamental question; what have we done with the time and the gifts we've been given? But there's always more than one way of reading scripture.

The traditional understanding interprets the master who goes on the 'journey' as Jesus himself, which conforms the master's departure to Jesus' leaving for heaven at his Ascension. We can think of the 'settling of accounts' as Jesus returning for the *Parousia*, the Second Coming, the Day of Judgement. This, we can say, is Matthew's world, the world of the early church, trying to pay heed to OT prophecy like Zephaniah's, whilst striving to make sense of what has happened in Jesus. Across each of his parables, Matthew's Jesus has been progressively reinforcing ideas that coalesce here, the last of his moral & spiritual tales.

But, the parable of the talents may have nothing to do with 'talent' as such, in the sense of distinctive gifts; we could focus on the idea that the master has entrusted a great deal to the slaves – even to the one who received only one talent – equivalent to 15 years wages for a labourer! This is quite a judgemental world too, compared to Luke's version of the same parable (19.11-27) which, though similarly punitive, doesn't refer to any 'outer darkness' or 'weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

I've recently become aware of a different interpretation of this parable, one that's quite challenging. Richard Ford, an American psychotherapist, believes there's much more going on here than meets the eye – and says that this parable suffers from '*a pervasive misconception, the consequence of an unfortunate collusion between modern Western values, and the altogether different motives of Matthew & Luke.*'

He believes that we Westerners, steeped as we are in the mores of modern capitalism, are missing what was obvious to Jesus' original, largely peasant audiences, namely, that this master's *modus operandi* is nothing short of criminal. In farming out to trusted agents both capital and entrepreneurial risk, the absentee master will realize profits of anywhere between 100 and 500 percent. The last slave clearly describes the nature of this exercise, "**Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed...**"

It's possible to look at this parable and observe three levels of operation, 1) the exploiting slave master, 2) the well-positioned slaves who are called upon to exploit, and 3) the poorly positioned labourers who are exploited. These three capture much of the economic realities of Jesus' day, organized as it was into three tiers:

- 1) The Roman overlords, rapacious of their colonies, who masked greed under a façade of law
- 2) The co-opted Jewish aristocrats, endlessly taxing and otherwise exploiting their fellow Jews, who kept some of the siphoned-off wealth for themselves but who surrendered much of it to Rome

3) hapless, unrecognized, victimized labourers – peasants, artisans, slaves - sole producers for the Empire.

The Roman governing class, in all their steely determination, was hierarchical, authoritarian, exploitative and punitive. The peasants, artisans & slaves were, by and large, illiterate, marginally nourished, voiceless, disorganized and subject to indefinite abuse. Absent from this *Pax Romana* was anything resembling our modern middle class, which could have mitigated against such wholesale fleecing of the poor.

So Jesus wasn't responding, like the later gospel editors, to the terror of Roman revenge that led to the ravaging of Jerusalem in 70 C. E. He was living within the rationalized subtleties of peaceful, legal, every day, exploitation. Ford assumes that in using the term 'slave', Jesus describes one whose personal identity has been subsumed into the life workings of another. Ford the psychologist points to the typical behaviour of one who tries to master the experience of oppression by identifying and taking-on the same role, as two of the slaves do.

The third slave is remarkable because of his conflicted perspectives. On the one hand, he claims to be afraid of his master but unaware of the danger of his passivity; he simply offers his failure, his inability or refusal to take action. His safest course would have been to invest – even at the lowest rate of risk or return. How did he miscalculate so badly, and then, in the final exchange, speak of his master in such a frank and almost insulting manner?

The master meanwhile, is secure in his aristocratic assumptions. He seems to think he's entitled to something

for nothing and invites his slaves to mimic his behaviour. Slaves, as with so many who are powerless, tend toward depression and the loss of capacity for independent initiative. This explains, to some extent, the 3rd slave's inability to take action. Of course, the slave may be superbly calculating. Under cover of a cowering façade and citing fear as his motive, he refuses to exploit or to be further exploited.

Considering all, could it be that this parable is evoking, with great sensitivity, the difficult position of an aristocratic Jew struggling to retain integrity, whilst immersed in the compromises endemic to the Jewish elite of the time? If so, the idea of the master as a stand-in for Jesus may be misconceived. His moral outrage may conceal shame that he's been discovered to be both greedy and exploitative.

If we accept Ford's analysis, the idea that the master is the spokesperson for the parable's moral is almost ironic, and it should be our task to decide precisely whose is the most ethical stance. Elsewhere, Jesus asserts that the poor are 'blessed' (Luke 6.20) – Matthew (5.3) has 'the poor in spirit'. Whether we decide for the master or his slave, in Ford's interpretation, they both qualify for God's blessing, as indeed do we. Jesus blesses the financially or spiritually poor because, within any structure of systemic injustice, they are the only ones left who are closer to innocence.

Spoken in the name of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Matthew 25.14-30 The Parable of the Talents

14 'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." ²¹His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

²²And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." ²³His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

²⁴Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." ²⁶But his master replied,

"You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.

²⁹For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Zephaniah 1.7, 12-end

⁷ Be silent before the Lord God!

For the day of the Lord is at hand;
the Lord has prepared a sacrifice,
he has consecrated his guests.

¹² At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and I will punish the people
who rest complacently on their dregs,
those who say in their hearts,
'The Lord will not do good,
nor will he do harm.'

¹³ Their wealth shall be plundered,
and their houses laid waste.
Though they build houses,
they shall not inhabit them;
though they plant vineyards,
they shall not drink wine from them.

¹⁴ The great day of the Lord is near,
near and hastening fast;
the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter,
the warrior cries aloud there.
¹⁵ That day will be a day of wrath,
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness,
¹⁶ a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the lofty battlements.

¹⁷ I will bring such distress upon people
that they shall walk like the blind;
because they have sinned against the Lord,
their blood shall be poured out like dust,
and their flesh like dung.

¹⁸ Neither their silver nor their gold
will be able to save them
on the day of the Lord's wrath;
in the fire of his passion
the whole earth shall be consumed;
for a full, a terrible end
he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that **the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.** ³When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us **keep awake and be sober;** ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For **God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ,** ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

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