

The Parable of the Talents by Rev John A. Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 18th November 2017 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: **Matthew 25:14-30**

Year A (2nd Sunday before Advent)

Introduction

Can you remember when you were young a time when someone entrusted you with something valuable to use or look after? Perhaps just after you passed your driving test your father or mother lent you their car for a long journey; or were you asked to babysit someone else's children for the first time? Or perhaps a big responsibility you were given in your first job. There was no one holding your hand or giving you directions; you may have been given some instructions, but now it was down to you... How did that feel? Exciting, scary? How did it go – did you crash the car, drop the baby or upset your company's valued client? Now, thinking about your life as a whole, what do you think is the biggest responsibility you have been given? Has it been a joy to carry it out, has it made many demands of you or been a breeze? What emotions do you associate with taking on this responsibility?

The parable of the talents

Today's Gospel reading is all about being entrusted with responsibilities.

The parable of the Talents is one of those parables which Jesus uses to hold a mirror up to his listeners. In last week's parable, Jesus told a story about ten bridesmaids, 5 of whom were foolish and 5 were wise. Implicitly, Jesus wanted his hearers and by implication us, too, to compare ourselves to the 10 girls – are we wise or foolish, prepared or unprepared to meet him face to face, when he comes again or when he die?

In today's parable there are 3 servants, and they are also contrasted. We are invited, as we listen, to think about ourselves – which servant are we most like? The real high flier who is given 5 talents and makes 5 more, or the less able servant who is given 2 and still manages to double his master's money, or the lazy servant who does nothing and gets into big trouble with his lord? And just in case you wonder what a talent was, let's just be clear about it. We use the word nowadays to mean a particular quality which you have, an ability or aptitude. The word has come into the English language as an interpretation of the meaning of this parable. But at the time of Jesus a talent was a huge sum of money which was worth roughly a quarter of a million pounds in today's money. The first servant in the story is given about £1.25m to invest, and ends up with £2.5m. Even the third servant has about £250,000 to look after.

So Jesus is not telling a story about how 3 boys spent their pocket money. If we're intended to apply this parable to our own lives, we need to understand that the stakes are high. There are big earnings to be made. And how we respond to the challenge is really important.

The three servants

Before I apply the teaching of the parable to ourselves, let me deal with one train of thought that upsets some people when they think about this parable. That is the question about whether the third servant is treated fairly. As British people, we have a real heart for the "underdog", the person at the bottom of the pile, the one who doesn't fit, or who gets a raw deal compared to others. I suppose it's really all about a sense of fair play. We want to cheer the athlete who crosses the line last, especially if he or she has suffered a mishap in the race – for example being tripped up by a competitor.

The third servant gets a right telling-off from his master when he has to report what he's done with the money. His excuse for burying the money rather than trading with it is that he was afraid of the master, who is a hard man, and was scared of losing it. So, we might reason, at least he hasn't lost it, or squandered it. The master has his money back – where's the harm in that?

We're tempted to swallow the servant's story. But Jesus doesn't intend for us to side with him. The master puts his finger on the root of the problem – “you wicked and *lazy* slave!” he says angrily. The clear intention of the master (who must be a very successful businessman, judging from the amount of money he has got to invest), was that the servants would make the money work for him. He's looking for a return on investment. (In Luke's version of this parable¹ this is explicitly stated). If it was just a case of the servant being afraid of losing the money, he could have invested it in a bank, where it would have been safe and would have yielded some interest.

No, the real problem is the servant's laziness and complacency, combined with bad attitude towards the master. In his answer it's almost as if he's saying that the master was partly blame: if the master hadn't been such a hard man he wouldn't have been afraid and wouldn't have buried the money. The reality is, however, that he has failed to fulfil his responsibilities and thought he could get away with just burying the money in the ground, where he wouldn't have to do anything about it. But now he has to face the music. He has failed to do even the bare minimum to satisfy his master, and he is now out on his ear.

It didn't have to be like this. At the beginning of the parable, Jesus said that the servants were given more or less money to work with, depending on their ability. Each servant was given what the master judged he could handle. What separated the first 2 from the third was their attitude. The first, Jesus said, went off *at once* and started trading with the money, as did the second. They couldn't wait to see how big a profit they could make with their master's money. And as a result they were rewarded by hearing their master saying, “Well done, good and trustworthy servant; share my joy”.

So the main question Jesus invites to ask ourselves is, which of these servants are we? Which would we like to be? And what would this mean in practice? What does the parable say to us as individuals, and to St Michael's as a church?

Servants of God

A book I was reading recently (*Matthew for Everyone* by the New Testament scholar Tom Wright) suggested that the people around Jesus may well have interpreted the parable in terms of the leaders of the Jewish nation – how faithful had they been in caring for God's special people, who had been given the Law by Moses and the Temple as the centre of worship?

But Jesus is [also] conscious that he will soon be “going away”, and entrusting his message and his work to his disciples, his church. Jesus has already touched on this theme at the end of chapter 24, where he talks of a householder going away and leaving one servant in charge of caring for the other servants and running the estate. Will that servant be trustworthy or not?

So I guess this is where we need to begin if we want to apply the parable to ourselves: do we see ourselves as God's servants? The word actually used in the original Greek means *slave*. Paul begins two of his letters by describing himself as “Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ”. To see myself as a slave of Jesus Christ is to say that I belong to him – the whole purpose of my life is to do his will, to carry out his work and to please him.

A slave was bought by his master for a sum of money. There is also a sense in which Jesus has paid the price for our lives on the Cross. He gave up his own life for us, because of his great love for us, and as Jesus says in John's Gospel, no one has greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.

¹ Luke 19:11-27

And he goes on to say, "I do not call you slaves any longer ... but I have called you friends" (John 15:15).

So the question to us is, how do we see ourselves in relation to Jesus? Do we see Jesus as a hard taskmaster, burdening us with responsibilities we would rather do without – a bit like the attitude of the third servant in the parable? Or are we like the first 2 servants, eager to put our faith into practice in our daily lives, keen to take responsibility for making the best use of what he has entrusted to us? Can he trust us to put his interests first, and to use our resources, time and energies to do his work of serving others and spreading the Gospel?

Putting it into practice

There are essentially two areas in which we can live and work as trustworthy servants of Jesus: our personal lives and our life as a church. Let me use the rest of this sermon to explore some of the ways we could do that practically.

In the first area, our personal lives, it's all about stewardship - using our time, talents (in the modern sense) and money in accordance with God's priorities. We have to make decisions about how much time and energy we give to different areas of our lives: to paid work, to our families and relationships, to voluntary work, such as in the church, and to making sure we also get some refreshment and relaxation. How this all fits together changes as we go through the different stages of life, but the key for a Christian is to "seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness" in how we do this. There are many pitfalls – such as becoming so enslaved to our paid job that our relationships suffer; or treating worship as an optional extra which we might do if we haven't got anything else to do this weekend.

How we use our money is important too. It's easy to let our decisions on money be influenced by the world around us, and to think that we *need* things which are in fact unnecessary luxuries. I've found that a good principle is to first decide how much you are going to give away to the church and to charity, and then allocate the rest. That way you don't let God's kingdom come last in the queue. In addition to regular giving, we need to be ready to respond to special needs – like the many disasters we hear and read about.

But the parable of the Talents doesn't just address us as individuals. As the Church we are the Bride of Christ. Just as in the marriage relationship the partners want to please each other, so as Jesus' Bride we want to make sure that we are extending God's Kingdom in the decisions we take and the priorities we have.

Our church Purpose Statement says that our aims are Knowing God for ourselves, Growing as individuals and as a church and Showing his love in the world.

Our worship needs to be dynamic and evolving, so that we and everyone who comes to our church services encounters God and comes to know him more. We should strive for excellence, and that applies not only to those who lead and plan worship but to each of us as we participate. How are you going to use this time you have set aside to be in church – will you think about the words you are saying and singing, and offer them to God in love? Will you take your moment at the communion rail to thank Jesus for the sacrifice he made for you on the cross?

We need to be getting to know newcomers and encouraging them to explore the faith for themselves; we need to develop the gifts and skills of our members and encourage more people to share a responsibility for the life of our church. We also need to take responsibility for our own spiritual growth as individuals, and as a church we need to provide a variety of opportunities for people to learn more about prayer and the Bible. Serving God in practical ways can also be a means of personal and spiritual growth. This church, like all churches, is largely run by volunteers. We are not looking for experts, but for people who have a heart to serve God and others. We have all got something to contribute.

Our third priority is to be showing God's love in all kinds of ways, including our support for charities, but also by playing out part in the life of our local community. There are some things we do corporately, such as the Youthworker project which seeks to reach out to ordinary young people in our town, as well as supporting the young people in our church. There are also many ways that church members get involved in the local community, through different kinds of voluntary work. I am sure there are many other ways we could serve the community corporately, if we have the involvement and support of ordinary members of this church.

Conclusion

The parable of the Talents has a challenging message for all of us today: to use the opportunities, gifts and money that God has entrusted to build his Kingdom here on earth. The Son of God came to earth to invite us and all people to be part of it. We have been fortunate to discover Christ for ourselves, and we have been made members of this amazing worldwide family, the Church, tasked with a mission to proclaim God's love to the world through word and deed. What God has entrusted to us is a treasure of infinite worth, far more than the sums of money which the master left with his servants in the parable. Will we be trustworthy servants of the God who calls us to share with all his saints in his eternal kingdom, by working for that kingdom here on earth? Will we repay the love that Jesus poured out for us on the Cross by living as his friends and sharing his love with others?

Christ calls us not to an easy life but to active service, whoever and wherever we are. The work is demanding, but fulfilling; and the reward is to hear him say to you, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant ... share your master's joy". Is that your ambition?

Questions for reflection

1. How do you feel about seeing yourself as a servant of Jesus, called to work for him? What about seeing yourself as a *friend* of Jesus?
2. Think about or write down the responsibilities you have in these areas:
 - Family
 - (Paid) work
 - Church
 - Community
 - Other

What difference does/should being a Christian make in these areas?

3. How are you using your *money* to further God's Kingdom?