



Date: 15 November, 2020

Reading: Matthew 25:14 – 30

Theme: Risking the way of grace

In 2011, for the 400th Anniversary of the Authorised Bible – The King James Version – linguist David Crystal wrote a book called *Begat*, which talked of the many ways that this translation has influenced the English language. One word that he didn't talk about, because its origins are older than the King James Version, and the Bible has been influencing language and culture for millennia, is 'talent'. From Greek, through Latin and into English, this word has changed from a unit of weight used for money and trading, to an expression of ability or performance. And all because of the parable that we heard today. The three men were given talents, according to their capacity. But our English understanding of the word talent doesn't assist us to understand this parable, it gets in the way and forces only one interpretation – don't bury your talent. That is why I asked Marshall to read a translation that doesn't have the word talent in it. So you could hear the story the way Jesus and Matthew intended, a slice of life in 1st Century Palestine that leads to a lesson about life in the kingdom of God while waiting for the kingdom to come in all its fulness.

A few times now I have talked about the theory and structure of stories – the rule of three. A rule that governs jokes as much as it does inspirational stories. The first two characters set up the situation and raise expectations and the third character is the punch line or the main lesson. Jesus parable about neighbours is the classic example; the traveller gets into trouble, the priest and the Levite walk past and the third character is expected to be the hero, and Jesus exploits the expectation with the surprise of the Samaritan. So here is another rule of three story; the situation of the master going on a journey and handing his assets to trusted servants is the set-up, with the first two servants dutifully managing those assets and setting up an expectation for the third servant to either be a hero or a lesson. There is a complication in the story because we are already told that the third servant buries his allocation in the ground. The rule of three then extends past the behaviour of the servant, to the response of the master when he returns. What would you expect the reaction of the master to the third character to be? The first two servants are congratulated and rewarded with the invitation to "enter into my joy", in other words 'no longer be my servants, come be my equal, so what will he say to the third servant? Knowing Jesus there will be a surprise, an exploitation of the rule. Maybe the master will still congratulate the man because the Law says it's wrong to charge interest and it's prudent to bury the money to protect it from thieves. Jesus parable about finding a treasure in a field makes sense because it was a common practice. But Jesus exploitation of the rule of three is not in the master's reaction – the expected disappointment and judgement – but in the servant's excuse – "I knew you to be harsh". The master trusted him to manage a share of the assets, trusted his capacity with the not-insignificant amount of a bag of gold. The master was

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gracious and generous and wanted the servants to enter into his joy. So how did this servant get such a negative concept of the master? Could it be that he had never served his master out of love and joy, but always out of fear and duty? Could it be that he had never caught the sense that the master's business was about risk and engagement with the world? Could it be that he was so used to being a servant, following rules and instructions, that he had no sense of responsibility?

While there is a message in this parable about using the gifts that you have been given, and not burying them or keeping them to yourself, there is a bigger message about not being gripped by fear and judgement. Not being constrained by rules and instructions, and a small view of your part in God's kingdom, but open to sharing yourself and your gifts with the wider world. Not to be constrained by an image of God as the heavenly rule giver and judge, but to see the gracious, generous God who came to share our life and give us the great gifts of reconciliation and the task of sharing that reconciliation with the world. The actions of the third servant in burying his allocation is as much about fear of judgement because he might lose some of the money as it is about doubt in his own abilities.

No one text contains all the gospel or all the teaching, so let's set this story alongside other stories and teachings.

- The idea of God's gifts recalls Paul's teachings on the gifts of the Spirit – the God given talents – and in that we have a similar idea of different gifts given to different people according to our abilities and capacities. A sharing in God's divine economy if you like. And there is a clear instruction to use those gifts for the building up of the people of God and the mission and ministry of the kingdom in the world. However, there is also a clear understanding from Paul that we do not do this on our own or in our own strength – they are gifts of the Spirit. And Paul is always talking of his weakness through which the strength of God shines. We are not in this on our own, subject to God's judgement of our success or failure. We serve a loving God who is calling us to join in and allow the God given gifts to flow through us. Take delight in your service rather than serve through fear.
- Luke's version of this story is quite interesting, not just in similarities and differences but in where Luke has placed the story in his Gospel – between the story of Zacchaeus and the entry into Jerusalem. Between a story about generosity and the account of the risky way of the Gospel in the world. Luke wants to connect these two stories with a simple point, "You can't keep the blessings of God to yourself, even at the risk of your security or the risk of all you have."

Matthew has a lot to say about how we are to live in this time between the times; the time of waiting for the wonderful reconciliation of the world to God that began with Jesus. He has so much to say that it takes five parables, each with a different facet on the task of waiting. Watchfulness, faithfulness, compassion, dedication, and here we have love, that risks all in the service of God. Risk that is not really risk because we live, move and act through the gifts of our gracious God. Risk that is not really risk because it is not failure that is subject to judgement, it is inaction. Risk that is not really risk because we see that this is the way of God through the life of Jesus. Risk that we see demonstrated by Peter in the face of death and rejection, and Paul in the face of foreign religions and culture. Risk that has taken

the Gospel from Palestine to Europe and Asia and around the world as faithful disciples took their God given gifts and the greatest gift – the love of God calling all to be reconciled – and engaged in the business of mission and ministry. Without fear of either failure or judgement because while Jesus may be absent in body, he is present in Spirit, in inspiration, and in example.

May you know the gracious, gift giving God and live without fear, taking on the responsibility of demonstrating that gracious, loving God to a hurting world.

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