

The parable of the talents

St. Brandon's

Matthew 25: 14-30

19th November 2017

Imagine that you're sitting at home minding your own business, perhaps watching the TV or reading the paper, or wasting your time doing a Sudoku, when all of a sudden a large delivery van pulls up outside. Well, you weren't expecting anything, so you assume it's for one of the neighbours. But no – there's someone coming up the path to the door. It's an unexpected present, and a large one at that. So large, in fact, that it takes two delivery men to bring it in and put it down on the sitting room floor.

You look at it, wrapped in cardboard with no give-away signs on the outside, and you think it looks a bit like some flat-packed furniture from a well-known Swedish store. Well, nothing for it but to open it up, and yes, it does look like some furniture, but it's not obviously anything. Not to worry, the instructions will show you what it is, and give you a step-by-step guide to putting it together. Part A to part B, repeat 10 times, not like that, like this. But there are no instructions. No picture of the finished article either. Only one of these – an alun key!

So you open all the packaging and lay everything out on the floor. A table? A sofa? A bed? A sofa-bed!? But no, not really any of these. So you get others in – husband / wife / partner / children / grandchildren who are particularly good at lego kits except that's not much help here, neighbours ("Are you sure it's not something you ordered?"), friends – and there are lots of helpful ideas and advice, and quite a few unhelpful ideas and advice, but in the end you have that rather sinking feeling, like the time you took that grandfather clock apart and couldn't quite work out how to put it all back together again. And no, it's not a grandfather clock.

Well, I'll leave you there on the floor, alun key in hand.

The parable of the talents is probably a familiar one, and it fits in with the theme that runs through this pre-Advent season, of being prepared for the day of judgment. Last Sunday, we had the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids which immediately precedes today's gospel reading, where it was about planning ahead by having enough oil ready for when the bridegroom appeared. And the other readings last week and this also focus on the coming of the "the day of the Lord", the day of judgment, and being prepared for it. (You might be somewhat reassured that Zephaniah (our OT reading), having apparently ended it all with all the inhabitants of the earth being destroyed, does continue in a rather more positive vein!)

The parable of the talents is usually taken to have a clear meaning. Each person is given something, in other words a set of gifts, abilities, resources, talents in a general sense, each to his or her own ability (although the parable contains an entirely male cast), and is expected to do something with it. And there will be a day of judgment, either at the end of life or when Jesus returns, when each of us will have to give an account of what we have done with what we were given. And the expectation is that we will have done something tangible and positive with it – doubling the original amount if the parable is to be taken literally – and then we will be praised and enter into the joy of our master, who is God, obviously. And that, if we haven't done something tangible and positive with it, we will be judged harshly, the little we have given to those who have made a success of life, and we will end up in outer darkness.

Well, yes – and no. There are a lot of things going on here some of which might make us quite uncomfortable. So let's explore the parable in more detail.

First, although, as I said, it contains an entirely male cast, it seems reasonable to make this gender neutral – so pretty obviously it applies to everyone not just to men. OK.

Second, while we can agree that the master is God, the fact that he has slaves is something we shouldn't just gloss over. But I don't think Jesus was condoning slavery, merely using the way society was ordered then to make His point. OK.

Third, this can sound a lot like justification by works. It's what you do with what you've got that determines whether you receive eternal life or get cast out. This isn't so easily answered, but it's worth noting that the master refers to the first two slaves as "good and trustworthy". He had placed his trust in them, entrusted them with his property, and they had responded appropriately. So maybe there is something here that says that the slaves were first faithful to their master, and that out of that faithfulness actions flowed. Maybe that's the same for us – that while justified by faith we respond to that by what we do. "I by my works will show you my faith" it says in the book of James (2:18). OK.

So having perhaps answered those obvious problems with the parable, what about the talents that the slaves were entrusted with? Well, a talent was worth about 16 years' wages. So, in today's terms, the first slave was given about £1.6m, the second £640k and the third £320k! Now this is Jesus exaggerating for effect, as He so often did in His parables. These are ridiculous amounts of money. But the point, if we take talents to mean gifts, abilities, resources including financial resources, so talents in a very general sense, is that each of us is given an amazing array of these. Even the slave who got only one talent couldn't complain that he couldn't do much with such a paltry sum. The point the parable is making is that we are each very talented people with much to offer, whatever we may think of ourselves.

Well, OK, but it's easy for the slaves in the parable because they've just got money and it's pretty obvious what they're supposed to do with it – they don't particularly need, but neither do they get, any instructions. And surely it's much more complicated for us. We are a complicated collection of all kinds of gifts, abilities, resources, talents. What are we supposed to construct out of them? What are we supposed to do with them? And that, of course, takes us back to the flat-packed furniture. It seems to me that it can sometimes feel that we've got all these parts to us and to our lives, and we're sure they're meant to make something, but it's not easy to work out what that something is, and how they all fit together. And there is no picture of the final item, of what we're supposed to be and do, and no instructions as to how to make it.

And in addition to that, in the parable the master is absent for the whole time that the slaves have to work with their talents. And it is a long time: "After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them". Now we talk a lot about the presence of God, we're coming in to the season of Emmanuel, God with us, and we are supposed to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. But what this parable seems to be suggesting is that we will also experience the absence of God in our lives. Not only are there no detailed instructions, but God isn't around to answer questions we might have as to what we should become, what we should do with all the talents we have. And if you're anything like me, this is how we experience it a lot of the time. We're there with this jumble of parts all over the floor that make up our lives, the gifts we've been given by God, the talents and resources we have, and we seem to be on our own in making sense and use of them. And that's perhaps another possible problem with the parable – it's very individualistic. Each slave is given their number of talents, each does what they think is right with them, each gets judged.

Well, I've given you lots of problems with the parable, and parables are meant to make us think hard, to wrestle with the bits that don't obviously make sense at first glance, and they're not to be taken too literally. But what about some solutions, what can we make of what this parable tells us?

Well let's start with the talents we have, the gifts, abilities and resources including financial resources we have at our disposal, that we're expected to make something of. And perhaps the first point to make is that one of the resources we have at our disposal is time. The master went away for a long time; the slaves had

a long time to make something of the talents they had been given. So typically we would interpret this parable as saying that we have a lifetime to make something of the talents we have been given, and time to make amends when we haven't used them well. And even though some of that time will have gone, the question that this parable leaves us with is this: "What can I do with the time I have left and the talents and resources I have been given to further the kingdom of God on earth?"

And we do have some instructions on what 'furthering the Kingdom of God' might mean. Last week's reading from Amos, for example, finished with God saying, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24). And nor is this something we do on our own. In my crazy illustration at the beginning, there were lots of people involved in trying to help sort out how all the bits fitted together, what they were to make. In the same way, we can and should work with others both to help us work out what our bit of furthering God's kingdom on earth looks like, and to work collaboratively, inside and outside the church, to help achieve that.

Two quick illustrations of what that might mean for us as church. We already support food banks and have done for some time now. Many of these are run by the Trussell Trust, a charity founded on Christian principles. And that's a good thing, a way of bringing in the kingdom of God on earth by feeding the hungry. Today, and something we have done for many years now, we give shoe boxes to bring joy and comfort to children in many parts of the world at Christmas. Samaritan's Purse which runs Operation Christmas Child is also a Christian charity established to help the world's poor and marginalised, including this year the Rohingya people who have fled to Bangladesh. That's also a good thing, stemming from our Christian faith to bring in a little bit of the kingdom of God to people's lives.

But generally, I think we're relatively good at dealing with symptoms, like feeding the hungry, and less good at dealing with causes. Why is there such poverty in the UK? How should we respond to the roll out of Universal Credit when the Trussell Trust has already warned of a 12% increase in demand for foodbank services where Universal Credit has been implemented, and is warning that it will struggle to meet demand this winter as the roll-out of Universal Credit affects more people. These are difficult questions, political questions, and perhaps as a result we shy away from them. But surely that is just as much where furthering the kingdom of God makes demands of us.

So, Jesus is quite clear that the day of judgment will come, quite clear that we are expected to do what we can, with the time we have and the talents and the resources we have received, to further the kingdom of God. This is neither easy nor comfortable territory, but together we can perhaps help each other to work out what our contributions, individually and collectively, might be to our vision and prayer that God's kingdom might come on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen