

Sunday between 13th and 19th November [33]

Matthew 25:14-30

It seems we are in the liturgical season of warnings. Last week we were warned to be ready, like the wise maidens and not lacking in preparedness like the foolish maidens because we know not when the time for us to come face to face with our Lord is at hand. This week we are challenged again in the parable of the talents. The warning is unambiguous, bear fruit for the Lord or be separated from him.

It is natural to feel a bit sorry for the servant given the least talents who buried his share to make sure he didn't lose it. He was trying to do the right thing, he wanted to be certain that he had what was given to him safe in order to give it back. His punishment has always seemed rather harsh. But, of course, this is a parable, not a factual encounter, and parables have to be unpicked to be understood.

The first thing to understand about this parable is that it isn't about money. On surface reading you could be forgiven for thinking that Jesus was encouraging the rich to get richer as a means of pleasing God. Of course, anyone who has read anything else of Jesus' teaching would know that money is an impediment to a relationship with God because of the temptations and distractions it creates. No, this parable uses money to represent something spiritual. Talents, a form of precious metal measurement, has a helpful dual meaning for us as our personal gifts, talents and qualities as an individual.

So as parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings, the first thing to establish is that the talents we are describing are not gold and silver but personal attributes, those talents we have as teachers, encouragers, givers of hospitality, administrators, musicians, confident speakers, people of prayer, disciples the list goes on, those parts of ourselves which we thank God for as they are our talents.

Once we understand this then we can look at the parable in a new light, to three people the Lord gave various talents, one had a number of talents, another a couple of talents and finally one had just a single talent. The 2 with several talents made use of them, whatever form they took, and bore fruit from them, if it were a talent of teaching, they taught and others learned from them, if it were a talent of administration they organised and made efficient things which benefitted others, if it were a talent of prayerfulness, they prayed on behalf of others and gave comfort through their work, whatever the talent they used it and made a difference in the world because of it.

The one with the single talent, however, hid it away. That person felt so conscious that there was little for them to offer that they choose to offer nothing at all, either that or they felt no need to share their talent with others, they didn't want to make a difference as that would be hard work for them, why should they spend time doing things for others, they only have this one thing to offer, let those with the many gifts and talents take the stage, they can bear enough fruit for everyone.

But that is not how it works with God. Just like the foolish maidens couldn't share oil with the wise because each had to have their own, so it is with the talents. You could argue that the master in the parable came back ahead, he gave out some talents and he received more back in return, as a household altogether the servants did ok, but it is not about what we do as a group but what we do as individuals. We cannot let others do the work and just wait for the reward on the strength of their efforts. We cannot benefit from the grace received and accepted by another, we have to enter into that relationship of grace with God ourselves, each and every one of us.

That's the real message here, just like last week's gospel, our relationship with God must be right. The servant in the parable said he didn't like the master's way of running his affairs,

you reap where you do not sow, he said. The other servants trusted their master and followed his commands, this servant was rebellious and had not entered into a relationship with his Lord, little wonder then that he had no desire to respond to the Lord's generosity with a radical generosity of his own.

Just like our relationship by grace with God, all the servants received their gifts just as they were, they didn't earn them, they were offered by the Lord, the judgement came once they had responded. For those who grasped the generosity of God and made use of it in their lives came the words we all long to hear, well done good and faithful servant, but for those who rebel and reject there is a separation from the Lord.

This parable really is a grave warning to us that we need to heed, just like the foolish and wise maidens, many people can look the same, they can be doing the same things on the surface, they can seem to be serving the same Lord, but things are not always what they seem. Christians have spent a lot of time looking outside their ranks to see who might be on the right road and who has been led astray, but the only thing we can know is our own heart, our own intentions and the state of our own relationship with God. Are we aware of the talents God has given us, do we even know what they are? Once we do, are we using them as an expression of gratitude for God's generous blessings upon us? The judgement will come not because of who we looked like we were serving, but whether or not we bore fruit in that service. That's what Jesus said, as usual he challenges us to walk the walk rather than just talk the talk. Are we standing up and being counted for God? It requires some work, it will not happen by itself but let us not forget that there are many talents and gifts, we never need to compare ourselves to what others are doing, but rather we need to look inward and find ways of sharing those parts of us that we attribute to God's generosity.

Not all our fruit bearing will be within the church community, our lives are bigger than our commitments to church, our relationships with family, friends and neighbours should be places where our talents shine through, our working lives offer opportunities, our unplanned encounters. This is how faith becomes an integral part of life, it is through our God given gifts that we live and can constantly reflect God's generosity and love.

And don't forget the servant with the least talents, all he had to do to avoid the judgement he suffered was to do something with his talent, he didn't have to make as much of it as the others, he just had to try to do something with it. For anyone wondering if they have enough to offer, you do! You have enough to offer, the first step is working out what it is, prayer will help, then finding ways to share your gift. You are probably already using your talent somehow, perhaps in a small, unseen way, but that is not important, God sees, God knows the thoughts and intentions of the heart and for as long as we are bearing the fruits of the spirit, God's generosity and love are being reflected through us and witnessed in the world.