

25th Sunday after Pentecost 2023 Matthew 25:14-30. The joy of the master

We are going to spend one more week in the Kingdom parables in Matthew's gospel. There are five of them, but we are only looking at two. Last week we looked at the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, and today the very well-known Parable of the Talents. The context is just Jesus and the disciples on the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem, so again it is a parable for Jesus' church, for us.

It is a pure fluke that we use the word "talent" to describe things we are innately good at. In Jesus' time a talent was a very large sum of money, and before that, in the Old Testament, a measure of weight.

We instantly think it means what we would describe as 'talents' people may have; like playing the piano, or being good at sport.

But what Jesus is talking about here isn't abilities, so much as the responsibilities or tasks that the Lord gives us in the *light* of our abilities and opportunities.

It is not a gift as if we could control it. And it's not an ability in itself that we could boast about. What it is, as is immediately apparent when we read it, is an investment that our maker makes in us, his children and servants. This is about deposits and returns.

Jesus is urging us to be true and make it our heart's desire to invest the abilities and the opportunities that God has equipped us with to further the Kingdom of God.

How then, does the faithful child of God 'invest' this 'talent' given them. By living a life totally open to our Lord, loving God with all we are and have and loving our neighbour and celebrating how wonderful life can be.

This parable can be quite easily misinterpreted, but I think the key phrase is, "enter into the joy of your master" (vv. 21, 23). This phrase, I believe, more than any other, serves as a signpost for interpreting the parable of the talents.

It is about entering into the joy of the Lord and the absolute superabundance of gifts that he has lavished on us. The cup, so to speak, is overflowing. A talent is a vast sum of money! Worth about fifteen years labourer's wages and generously distributed to each of the servants, though in different amounts.

So the master entrusts his wealth to his servants. We are the body of Christ – the richness of all things is given to us collectively. The least of our talents is unimaginably huge! Not only is the master trusting us with his wealth, but he does so over a long period of time.

Our culture, which places so much value on things happening immediately, instantaneously, has become unaccustomed to waiting. We are given our whole lives to use these gifts given to us to fulfil the task of God's people. Some start early and some start late. It makes no difference to the master.

Now we need to be clear on the character of the master here, and to accurately picture the master we need to do so in this context of superabundance. Matthew is equating the master with Jesus, and we know a lot about the character of Jesus. He is the one who is present with the servants and then the one who departs only to come back again and never leave or forsake them.

Remember this is for the future church, so we read it in a New Testament way, and Jesus just cannot be interpreted as a hard slave-master who demands unjust practices for profit from his servants.

What he is doing is inviting his servants into a fullness, a superabundance of grace that is continually offered. 17th century, Isaac of Syria put it this way: "God can only give faithful love."

The master, already possessing the gift of all the talents in the world to give to whomsoever he pleases, is inviting his servants to share in his joy. When the first two are finally invited to "enter the joy of their master," they are perhaps not entering a greater fullness than before but rather now are able to recognize the dynamics of joy that undergird the gift of faith.

The joy of the master is the joy of the feast that is self-giving, sharing, being distributed into the world. In this sense the interest gained on the talents is like the hundred-fold that the disciple receives when he or she gives everything away to follow Jesus (Matthew 19:29).

The first two slaves show that the obedience of trust is not a burden or a fearful thing, but is precisely the joy of discipleship in which everything is given (both the gift and the interest!).

When we use the talent that God has given us, remembering that even the least of which is extravagantly over the top, it does not become a burden. Here is the thing; the things we are talented in are the things we tend to love doing. This is what entering onto the joy of the master means.

We are filled with joy when we "invest" our talent in the bank of Christ. No matter what that talent is. Paul writes in his letters that "whatever we do, do it all in the name of Jesus Christ." He is not referring just to our prayers, but to literally everything we do.

What then can be said about the third servant? The judgment still appears to be very harsh. However, if we consider the parable as a parable of invitation, perhaps his plight takes on a different perspective. If, as I have tried to say, the master is inviting, continually inviting into superabundance, grace, and joy (which is nothing other than inviting into discipleship), then

the only conclusion that can be drawn is the third servant is not able to hear or accept the invitation.

Those who are given what *they perceive* to be little, even though it is a huge amount – our very life – and bury it will lose all, as they have placed themselves outside the city gates of the new Jerusalem, our eternal home. The third servant has not only buried the talent, but he has also buried himself. The third servant is not so much condemned as he condemns himself to a place without joy, light, or life.

When we look at the parable in Jesus' terms then, those who have been given much and invested their all in the master's kingdom, inherit much more. The whole Kingdom of Heaven is given to them where they will reign with the master.

So this has nothing to do with prudent investing or financial practices, nor a sign of a nasty, capricious, greedy, judgemental God. This would be seriously misusing a really profound gospel invitation into the Kingdom of God where calculation is abolished. There is no abacus in heaven. In fact, we discover in this realm the very opposite of a materialist approach to life; the interest accrues in the giving away of our talent. We leave the compounding, as it were, to the master. Let me pray ...