

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

Gospel of Matthew 25: 14-30

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they

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have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

TODAY'S GOSPEL READING IS DIFFICULT, to say the least.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like this: a wealthy man goes away for an extended period of time, leaving his economic affairs in the hands of three slaves. When he returns, he learns that two of the slaves had engaged in business with the money they had been given and doubled its value; while the third buried the money he had been given and had no earnings to give his master.

I

The man praises the first two men in the strongest language. He tells them that because of the trustworthiness

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they have shown in a few things they will be put in charge of many things. He adds: "Enter into the joy of your master."

We do not know whether the trading by the two slaves was successful because of their skill or was just their good luck. Outcome was all, or so it seems.

Likewise, we are not told what the master would have done if the slaves had lost money. The third slave seems to have had that possibility in mind. Suppose he invested the talent he was given and the investment failed? Would he owe the man for the whole talent? A single talent was then a fantastic amount of money—more than a laborer would make in many life-times.

The slave's response, which seems sensible enough to me, was to make sure he would not lose any of the man's money. He put the highest value on returning in full whatever he had been given and simply hid it in the ground.

He guessed wrong. This is not enough for the master, by a long shot. He condemns the slave in the strongest language and tells his other slaves to throw him into the outer darkness.

So far this sounds like something from a treatise on commercial capitalism, telling us what every banker knows, that money that is not invested is useless, even dead.

When Jesus tells us that this is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, it seems that he is approving both what the man did and the whole economic and social system of which the master is a part. Can this really be his idea of the kingdom of heaven? It seems different from anything he has ever said on the acquisition and expenditure of wealth.

What is going on here?

II

We need to think first about how a parable like this is supposed to work. When Jesus says the kingdom of God is like what happens in this story, I think he does not mean that it is like it in every respect. He certainly does not think that slavery is a part of the kingdom.

I think this parable, like some others, works as a kind of puzzle. It is a mixture of different elements—running from the joy of the master, which sounds good, to slavery which does not. The real question for us, and for the disciples to whom Jesus is speaking, is this: What part of this story is like the Kingdom of Heaven? What part not?

If we can figure that out we will have the pleasure of solving a puzzle, as the confusion and inconsistency disappear. Our pleasure at the discovery of the truth will

affirm it. This experience of mystification coming clear will make the parable live more fully in our minds and hearts.

A

So what part of this story does express something true and important about the Kingdom of Heaven?

Think of the bare bones of the story:

The rich man has entrusted what he values most to three people who are much less powerful than he. Without giving directions he trusts them to make good use of it, to bring it into their lives and the lives of their community. Two of them do, one does not.

So stated, this is very much like what God does with us. In creating us he has entrusted us with what he most values, our lives—as he demonstrates when he gives his only Son to save them. What does this parable say about how God wants us to live with this gift of life?

I think it is telling us that God wants us to use our energies and abilities confidently—roughly as the two slaves did in such a different context. God does not want us to be afraid of life. He does not want us to bury our lives out of fear or depression, as the third slave did.

Of course he knows, as we do, that energetic life brings risks. Think of the decision to marry or have children! Or to take a job in a remote part of the country, or to be a nurse in the midst of a pandemic!

Still, I think God is saying to us, don't be afraid to live a full life in my service. Do not withdraw from life out of fear but live it genuinely, risks and all. That's what it is like in the Kingdom of Heaven.

If we don't—or can't—do this I don't think God will throw us into darkness. That is not part of the Kingdom. But

we may have to face the fact that we have not lived fully, a serious matter.

This is a real topic for us in our own lives. The questions presented here — of courage vs fear, risk vs safety, engagement vs safeness—come up all the time, really on a daily basis. It is often hard to make the necessary judgment about what to do. But Jesus tells us that God is speaking to us all the time, telling us not to be afraid, but to live the life he would have us live.

B

That is to read the passage as about God the Creator. We can also read it as about Jesus himself, who is after all the author of the parable. He is speaking directly to his disciples in part about something specific they will soon experience, his crucifixion and death.

When he is crucified he will leave them, as the master left his slaves. He telling them in this parable is how he wants them to live while he is gone. He wants them to maintain their sense of the value of their life, of themselves, of what they have been doing. He wants them to keep alive what he has taught and shown them, as they carry out his mission of spreading the word and building the community that will be the church.

This is crucial encouragement: when he departs it would be easy for the disciples to collapse into depression or despair or grief, to bury their hearts in the dirt.

C

In encouraging his disciples this way Jesus is of course encouraging us as well. He left us, ages ago, when he ascended to heaven. But he will come back, and when he does—or when we go to him—he hopes that he will find that

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we have led engaged and fruitful lives in his service, lives not of fear and anxiety but lives of trust and strength.

This is clear enough, but how can we do this? Suppose we are afraid, or depressed? Suppose we just need Jesus and his Father here? In the parable Jesus says two things that might help us.

The first has to do with trustworthiness. Remember that the man praises his two slaves because they are trustworthy. Both Jesus and the Father also want us to be trustworthy, but in a different way. This kind of trustworthiness does not mean success at trading stock or other assets. What does it mean?

One obvious meaning, as I have suggested, is that we should carry out the tasks we have been given with energy and hope and confidence. We should be trustworthy in that sense.

But I think there is a second meaning here, equally important: that we learn to have trust in ourselves, in the strength and heart and wisdom we have been given. While Jesus is gone we should have confidence in him and confidence in ourselves, in our own capacities and our own judgment. He wants us to be fully ourselves in the deepest way. Only then will we be able to serve him the way he wants to be served, through the love of our God and our neighbor.

There is also help in the phrase: “enter into the joy of your master.” This is a deeply loving and powerful thought, one that can work as a promise of the most important kind, telling us what we can hope for: that if we live a life that is trustworthy in the double sense I have suggested—worthy of God’s trust and our own,—God will ask us to share his joy.

What joy? His joy in us, and who we have become, his joy in you and me! I don’t know about you, but even the idea

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of this is to me amazing: that God should be full of joy at who we have become!

But I think this is in fact the reward of a faithful and trusting life, if with God's help we can achieve it: that we discover that what we have done and who we have been has brought joy to God. With Jesus I believe that this can and does happen.

But, you ask, what if we fail, as we are sure to do in great ways or small? This question calls for long and serious thought, but the short version is that we know from what Jesus has said elsewhere that we are to recognize our failings and to confess them with a contrite heart. If we do that he will not only forgive us, he will do so with joy.

AMEN

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