

The Parable of the Talents – Rev Keith King. St Columba 13 November 2011

The Parable of the Talents is well known and well worn.

In the context of Matthews Gospel it fits within a collection of parables towards the end of the ministry of Jesus and is in response to questions from the disciples about 'The end of the age' or the coming of the 'Realm of God'.

In that context the traditional interpretation of the parable is all about being ready and using the gifts of life wisely.

I have heard many sermons, and probably preached one or two myself, where there is a warning not to bury one's gifts and talents but to use them well that the realm of God may indeed come in all its fullness, lest we will be 'thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (don't you just love that phrase!)

However as with all parables and as with scripture generally, there are levels of interpretation and other ways of looking at familiar stories.

In his book 'Parables of Subversive Speech' William Herzog offers us another view of this story flowing from life among the oppressed.

Herzog suggests that rather than being the villain of the story, the third servant, who buries the master's money, is in fact the hero of the piece!

To understand how he comes to this conclusion we need to unpack this parable and the world in which it was initially delivered:

In the ancient world heads of elite households could not stay at home if he intended to protect his interest and expand his influence.

Rather he would travel around his estates and abroad to develop new business opportunities and network and hob nob amongst the rich and famous.

Of course this was in the days before rapid travel and he would often be away for weeks, months if not years at a time.

For the accumulation of his wealth and to maintain his power and influence while he was away he needed to entrust important portions of his household to retainers.

These powerful figures were not actually household slaves although they would have been called such to emphasize their dependence on their patron-master.

The system was a little bit like Downton Abbey where there was a hierarchy of servants in the master's household.

Downstairs in Downton Abbey Carson is the head butler at the top of the chain in charge of the Earl's house while Daisy is the lowest of the low as cook's helper.

In Matthew's Gospel the phrase which is usually interpreted as 'to each according to their ability' could just as easily be rendered as 'to each according to their power'.

So in the parable each of the servants are at different levels in this hierarchy; the one who is given five talents is the most powerful and the one who is given a single talent the least.

In the ancient world much of the master's money was made by making loans to peasant farmers so they could plant crops.

It was often at very high rates of interest from 60 to 200%. The land was used as collateral and in the years the crops did not cover their indebtedness the lender would foreclose.

Servants would further work the system while their master was away by managing these loans and investing funds in small manufacturing operations that specialised in luxury items and entering into trading partnerships to distribute these goods.

It was of course only the elite that could afford these luxury items so the markets were essentially pandering to the elite's lust for luxury.

So while the master was away, the servant would combine the money they had received from the master with the raw goods extracted from the peasants who were part of the household, enter into manipulative trading partnerships and thus increase the wealth they had.

The first priority was to double the money given by the master; after that the servant would take his cut.

So the servant would exploit the peasant or village base of the household; the merchants with whom they had entered into a common venture; and the peasants with whom they had made loans. This was a lucrative money making cycle for the servants and the master.

This was not considered in any way unfair or out of the ordinary – it was simply ‘honest graft’ of the day.

The hearers of the parable would have understood all this.

The third servant is clearly the focus of this parable.

He receives as much attention on the day of reckoning as the other two combined.

Apart from the fact that he is part of the inner circle and enjoys the master’s trust the hearers of the parable know nothing about him.

For Jesus there is a number of possible scenarios available as he tells the story.

The servant might have entered into partnership with the poor, which, according to the rabbis, is greater than offering charity.

But instead he buries the talent in the ground and so takes the best precaution against theft and liability.

When called before his aristocratic patron, the third servant’s speech would have astonished the hearers.

It is not so much the sauciness of the speech that sets it apart but its honesty.

The third servant cuts through the crap and identifies the master for what he is: strict, cruel, harsh and merciless. In effect he shames the master through his unexpected attack.

He is ‘blowing the whistle’ on the aristocratic master and the system by which he accumulates his wealth.

The aristocrat does not deny the truth of the servant's description of him because he understands exploitation and wasteful living as honourable! It is simply the way things are...

The third servant has named the master and his occupation from another point of view. He has exposed the sham of what has transpired and placed it under the light of clear analysis and prophetic judgement.

And finally to cover himself this third servant returns to the master what is his, and thus show himself to be an honourable person!

The judgement is immediate. Having spoken the truth the servant must be vilified, shamed and humiliated so that his words will carry no weight – “You wicked, lazy slave...”

It is the oppressive elite who labels the honest servant ‘wicked’ and ‘lazy’ for the purpose of stigmatising him and dismissing any implied criticism.

This is a technique used time and time again from those in power to silence the voice of opposition be it the Springbok tour, homosexual law reform or currently social welfare reform to name but a few.

So the hero of this parable is the third servant.

By digging a hole and burying the aristocrat's talent in the ground, he has taken it out of circulation.

It cannot be used to disposes more peasant's from their lands through its dispersion through usurious loans.

By his actions the third servant dissociates himself from the system that he himself has used in the past to attain his position of power and influence.

No motivation is given in the parable; an honourable person is known by their actions!

The third servant, the ‘whistle blower’ is not fool. He realises he will pay the price, but he has decided to accept the cost rather than continue to pursue and exploitative path.

For me William Herzog has opened up a complete new vista to this familiar parable and has given it teeth that I never saw before.

In these times of excess in financial markets where the 'masters' syphon off millions in annual salaries and profits while the workers are asked to survive on a minimum wage of \$13.50 an hour, this parable certainly has something to say for our time.

It is so easy to 'work the system'; but here Jesus is clearly calling his hearers to buck that system.

In a recent Radio New Zealand documentary on poverty a Pacific Island woman spoke in a wavering voice at the difficulty she had raising a family of seven children on \$13.50 an hour. I wept!

We live in a country where there is more than enough for all. It is obscene that families have to struggle to get food on the table where others enjoy salaries that are in the millions of dollars annually.

The third servant in this situation has much to offer and teach us...

So as we leave from here today, may we have 'ears to hear' and may we stand by the 'whistle blowers' in whatever form they may appear that indeed their may be justice and equity for all – that the realm of God may come.