

## Matthew 25: 14-30 – Talents

### Prayer

One thing I love about this church family is the way in which so many of you use your talents – musical, artistic, with the children, with older people, welcoming and so on. Of course, there's more that we can do; I'm sure that for many of you I have no idea of how wonderfully talented you are. Perhaps you are shy about your talents, or you have no confidence that they matter. Confession-time here – this time of year Saturday evenings, Anna and I like to sit down, draw the curtains, shut the world out, eat fish and chips and watch *Strictly Come Dancing*. I know I'm in my declining years but one thing I do enjoy is to see some of those competitors develop their dancing talents in ways that surprise their families and themselves and exceed their own expectations. Maybe you can think of ways you have surprised yourself to find you're not bad at something you had never expected. Parenting or grandparenting can be like that.

Talents – the word originally was about money and a vast sum it was. Our reading from Matthew 25 is often called *the parable of the talents*. In the story Jesus told, a man summons his servants, his workforce and gives them each some money to look after in his absence. It's hard to translate exact sums but the equivalent today of one talent is over £200,000. That's each talent. So the man given five talents was handed over a million pounds. Then having handed over the money he went away; he didn't tell them when he would be back. He didn't tell them what to do with the money. He gave them that responsibility. He would be back and they would need to give an account.

There's something here that runs counter to what we are often told. We are bombarded with the idea that we are responsible only to ourselves and any others we choose. The philosophy of the autonomy of the individual, if you like, is deeply engrained in the western world. So it follows that the greatest good is to be true to yourself; the deepest tragedy is to fail to reach your potential and fulfil yourself. We are all at the centre of our own little world. Now in contrast the Bible has a clear message about responsibility. It's there in the creation story where the Lord creates the human race to care for the earth. It's there in Jesus who said that it food and drink for him to do the work of his Father. Those of us who are Christians know that God calls us to joyful obedience, because we will each one of us have to give an account to our Father God for what we have done with our lives. We are responsible.

But we are not all responsible for the same. One servant is given five talents, one two talents and one the single talent. And it is one of life's annoying little features that there are some people who are brilliant at sport, the life and soul of every party, are fast-tracked through promotion, play ten different instruments, have a beautiful partner and speak six languages fluently, and there's the rest of us. When it comes to handing out gifts, we're not all the same, but according to this story Jesus told, that doesn't matter. The value is not in the gifts themselves, but in what we do with the gifts. We are responsible for the gifts we have; we are not responsible for the gifts we don't have. What matters is not how gifted you are – or not – but how you and I use our gifts. Over two hundred years ago the great Scottish preacher Robert Murray M'Cheyne said, *It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus*. You may be phenomenally gifted or modestly gifted, but how much are we like Jesus?

This parable – like many passages in Scripture – can be used or misused in all kinds of ways. Let me give you a couple of examples – there's the capitalist who tells us that this is all about making money – you need money to make money. In blunt terms are you a winner or a loser when it comes to

making money? The successful entrepreneur in Jesus' story doubled his money and was given the loser's money as a reward. Sounds like a game of Monopoly in our house. Or there's the primary school assembly approach -you have to make the most of yourself – work hard and don't be lazy children. Make the most of what you've been given.

Well, hmm – I think the first is misdirected. Jesus was not a pale prototype of Donald Trump, thank the Lord. The second gets closer but still, the gifts that you and I have been given are not for our own fulfilment or pleasure. They are the Lord's and we are responsible to him for how we use our gifts and talents. Oh do please forgive me if you think I am labouring this point, because unless we see our gifts as something from the Lord that we are to use for the Lord, then we are likely to miss the whole area of sacrificial service. All too easy to miss it. If we follow Jesus we find he leads us to the cross. True Christian service inevitably and invariably means sacrifice. But you know sacrifice does not mean misery. The writer of Hebrews in the New Testament wrote about Jesus going to the cross *for the joy set before him* – it's in chapter 12:2. There is a joy in serving the Lord, even though in terms of human fulfilment it looks like foolishness and sacrifice.

Now we have to be careful here because it's easy to make another mistake. I wonder if anyone has been thinking about how we might use our gifts here in church – reading, leading the prayers, music, looking after the building and so on. Now of course I do want to encourage more and more people to use their gifts here, but Lord forbid that we only think about what we do here in church. It's that dreaded secular/spiritual divide. We can use our gifts to serve the Lord wherever he calls us to be – in our employment, in caring for elderly relatives or friends, as a community councillor or local volunteer, in all kinds of ways. There was a Korean church leader who began every morning by getting out of bed and as his feet hit the mat would say, *Good morning, Holy Spirit, what are we going to do today?* How are we going to use the gifts God has given us for his work today?

In the story three servants; two different approaches. Every now and then a story hits the headlines about someone digging up a treasure trove from the ancient world – piles of ancient Roman coins or whatever. Quite likely that was someone who was doing what this chap with one talent did. How do you look after a fortune when there are no banks? Burying it was a common answer – as long as you marked the spot well at least in your mind. The drawbacks are obvious! Buried money was safe but useless. What did Jesus have in mind? Was he thinking perhaps of the religious leaders of his day who were deeply concerned to preserve the religious traditions that they had inherited at a time when the Romans were occupying the land? Preserving the tradition to be able to pass it on? Don't take risks or you might lose everything. Is this not the point that Jesus was making about the servant who buried his one talent? Look what the master condemned when he returned and called the servant to account? It wasn't his failure to make a load more money; it was his unwillingness even to have a go. He took no risks. One person writing about this story put it this way – *a religion concerned only with not doing any wrong*. Is that really what we are about? Or is there something more exciting?

I had a birthday earlier this month – the last of the 60's. Tempting to review. Have I lived sacrificially and riskily? I used to have potential; now I have experience! But this passage is not an invitation just to look back and think about what we could have done or to feel guilty about some of the mess-ups. There's another sermon about forgiveness, full and setting us free. But this is a passage to set us thinking forward – from now on we will use those gifts and talents we do have – the wisdom and experience of years, the energy, whether great or small – use them for Jesus. What's gone is gone, what's done is done. But tomorrow morning every one of us can wake up and say, *Good morning, Holy Spirit, what are we going to do today?*

And then finally what is the reward for using our gifts responsibly? Is it a nice retirement package where we can put our feet up? It seems not – give the one talent to the one who has ten – yet more responsibility. Let's just get on with the work Jesus has given us to do with the gifts and talents he has provided. *Good morning, Holy Spirit, what are we going to do today? Amen.*