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The Twenty-Fifth Sunday of Pentecost

The Parable of Talents

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This Sunday is Holy Scripture Sunday. That's not its official title or anything but the collect that gathered us this morning in worship is a famous collect penned by Thomas Cranmer and is all about the Christian's relationship to Holy Scripture – scripture is written for our learning, and we are to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest it, quite literally to consume it, and to be consumed by it. For we do so because in it, we encounter God. Its important that we get clear on what Scripture is before we embark on interpreting the infamous parable Jesus tells this morning, the parable of the talents.

There are two common ways the Scriptures are understood in Christianity today. The first is that the Bible is an inerrant document literally laying before us the Divinely dictated thoughts, and doing even more than that – giving us literal history, literal eyewitness accounts to everything that happened. This inerrancy approach tends to think that Scripture is meant to help us lead moral lives by following the letter of the book – Scripture as a divinely inspired behavior manual. The other approach is the more progressive approach which sees the Bible as a collection of myths, symbols, quasi-historic fables that are meant to inspire us to live lives of justice, freedom, and peace. This view doesn't quite look to Scripture to know God's exact thoughts; it more approaches Scriptures looking for a universal ethic on how to organize the world.

The collect we prayed this morning gently undercuts both views. Scripture isn't an inerrant document, nor is it a kind of collection of moral sentiments. Scripture is like a stained glass window, made up of irregular and seemingly incongruous pieces, that mysteriously fit together to tell a larger story. Scripture is a beautiful collage, and its purpose is to let the light of God flow into our hearts that they might embrace and be embraced by the blessed hope of life with God. The point: Scripture is fundamentally not about us, us determining God's thoughts, or being inspired by its stories as if it were a kind of Aesop's fable.

Of course, its instinctive to make the Scripture, and in our case the Parable of the Talents, all about us. There are two common readings. The first is that the talents mean, well, talents – they refer to human abilities. Jesus is obviously talking about people with extraordinary abilities like you and me and telling us not to be shy about changing the world in our image. Alternatively, if we read the parable as a moral tale, a kind of Aesop's fable, then

the talents clearly mean money. Jesus is obviously saying ‘Money won’t help you if you keep it under your bed. Go out and make more money. Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can.’ How wonderful to have a parable that tells us we’re fabulously gifted and should make more money.

But Christianity, and the Bible, and indeed this parable is not about us. It’s about God, and about how Jesus shows us the character of God. And if we’re to live with God forever, we’re going to need to be ready to face God on judgement day. That’s what this and the other two parables of Matthew chapter 25 – the ten bridesmaids and the sheep and the goats – are all about. Jesus is preparing us to face judgement.

The parable comes in four scenes. Scene 1 is before the man leaves for the journey. Scene 2 is what happens while he is away. Scene 3 is what happens when he gets back. And Scene 4 is what happens to the third slave.

The talents are not natural abilities or great wealth but the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the talent Jesus leaves the Church for the time until he returns. This parable is not telling us how to come to terms with the fact that we’re super-talented or super-rich. It’s telling us that, in giving us the Holy Spirit, Jesus has left the church all the gifts it needs for the time between his first coming and his second, and that if we don’t use those gifts we’ll be in trouble.

So in Scene 1 the disciples learn all they need to know. Jesus is soon going to go away, which seems like bad news; but he’s entrusting them with everything that is his, which sounds like quite a lot. They are his slaves. To say we’re Jesus’ slaves means we belong wholly to Jesus, which is wonderful, fantastic news. It means human nature and destiny are God’s problem, not ours. What a relief that is. It’s not necessary to dwell too much on the significance of the talents into five, two and one. Jesus doesn’t give us more than we can cope with; and it’s not a competition. There’s no suggestion that the slave with five talents is better or more important than the slave with two. And don’t forget that a talent was a colossal sum, maybe a million dollars in our money. Even the slave with one talent had way more than enough.

For some reason, and this is a mystery, one slave didn’t use the gift. That’s the shock we get in Scene 2. We may say, ‘Wasn’t it lucky that the first two slaves got a healthy return on their investment – I wonder how they knew which brokers to deal with

and whether the DOW was looking promising each morning.’ But not if we remember that these slaves have spent quite a lot of their lives with this master. How do we know that? Because the master is Jesus, and the slaves are the disciples, and this parable comes right at the very end of Jesus’ ministry, by which time the disciples have seen the length and breadth and height and depth of what God has been doing in Jesus. The way they use their massive gifts from Jesus, in other words the Holy Spirit, is by doing the things Jesus did, spending time with the people he spent time with, breaking bread with notorious sinners and facing the criticism of the powerful. We know what standards of success Jesus lived by. So success for the disciples means success in imitating Jesus. The one who was given some of Jesus’ gifts looked rather like Jesus. The one who was given a lot of Jesus’ gifts looked a lot like Jesus.

Come Scene 3, when the master returns, we find that imitating Jesus was just what Jesus wanted. Jesus says, ‘You spent a lot of time with me to learn how I do business. I gave you these gifts so you could do business the way I do business. And you have, with the same result.

Well done.’ But then it comes to light that the third slave, who was given all the gifts Jesus bestowed upon the church, just not the special gifts, has done nothing with them. Jesus is bewildered. ‘You never realized that the Eucharist was a meal where all kinds of people could gather round my table, rich and poor, women and men, skilled and unskilled, academic stars and those with special educational needs, black, Hispanic, Chinese, Indian sub-continent, Arab, Caucasian, all of them bringing different things to the table and each receiving back the same?’ ‘I guess not.’ ‘You never realized that baptism was the moment when all your foolishness and pride, all you evil and malice, could be washed away and you could be incorporated into the way God is redeeming the world?’ ‘Nope.’ ‘You never realized that reading Scripture invites you into a constant discovery of God’s character and a revelation of the way God has already redeemed the world?’ ‘Uh – uh’ You never realized that in prayer you could open your whole heart to God and find that God’s whole heart is opened up to you?’ ‘Errr... no.’

And now at last we can begin to make sense of Scene 4, with its celebrated wailing and gnashing of teeth. Can’t you imagine Jesus’ reaction his disciple? ‘I don’t believe this! You spend three

years with me traipsing round Palestine. You see the way I share food with the outcast and bring all around my table. You see the way I transform people and give them possibilities they never dreamed of. You see the way I fulfill all God's promises. You see the way I open out a way to the Father that makes eternal life possible to all people. And then I give you all the gifts you need to establish and sustain this life after I've gone. But you don't. And now I'm back, you're saying it's my fault. You've made up this story that I'm a cruel master who reaps where I haven't sown. What are you saying? You yourself have witnessed me sowing seed everywhere I've gone, offering every person I've met the opportunity to enter the kingdom of God. What do you take me for? You're making up a story that's the absolute opposite of the truth for which I have laid down my life, and you're using that story to justify your astonishing laziness. I've told you, I've shown you, and I've empowered you, but you've blocked your ears, closed your eyes, and folded your arms, and made up a story about me to excuse it all.'

I've gone through the parable in detail because I've met so many people for whom this has become the most significant story in the whole Bible. They're people who're deeply aware of their own social advantage and look to the Bible to teach them how to use such privilege without feeling guilty all the time. Maybe you're one of them. If you are, I have news for you. This parable is not fundamentally about you. It's about Jesus. It's telling us that Jesus is not a cunning manipulator, who gives us mysterious talents and then lies in wait to see whether we fail to use them properly. No, Jesus is a boundlessly generous friend who goes away and gives us far more than we want or need to imitate him in his absence. If we assume he's a generous friend we'll experience the miracle and abundance of life in the Spirit. If we take him for a cunning manipulator we'll experience life as miserable scarcity.

So this is what the parable means for us. Jesus has told us and shown us everything he means by church and kingdom. The church is the way he works through the ministry of those who seek to follow him, and the kingdom is the way he works in spite of the indifference and rejection of the world and the many failures of the church. But, for the moment, Jesus is gone. Before he left he empowered his church with all the gifts it needs to obey his teachings and imitate his ministry. What he wants us to do is to use the gifts he gives us, and if we do so we'll succeed

in the only way that matters – we'll end up looking and living like him. But what we can't do is just neglect these wonderful gifts he's given us to shape church and kingdom. To justify doing so we would have to make up some false story that either Jesus hadn't given us these gifts or that he'll reject us on some other grounds. Such a story is a lie. It is making Jesus into a monster. How could someone who'd seen Jesus lay down his life, heard his words, received his invitation, been empowered with his gifts and been sent forth into his kingdom, ever take him for a distant, cruel or merciless master? Jesus says in this parable, and says to us today, 'I've given you everything you need to walk in my ways until I return. I have told you, shown you and empowered you. Trust me, and use what I have given you. I will never let you down. What do you take me for?'

But as I said, the parable isn't fundamentally about us. Every parable has more depth the closer you look at it. To get to the root of this parable you need to see Jesus not just as the master who gives us gifts and the slave who puts God's gifts to work, but as the talents themselves. For in sending Jesus, the Father didn't bury God's love for creation in a hole dug in the ground; instead the Father took that love to market, to trade with it, to face the risks and sufferings and dangers of relationship and encounter. The five talents are, in the end, the incarnation – God risking everything to be with us: the five more talents are, in the end, Jesus' resurrection – the proof that we will be with God forever. Jesus' parables aren't Aesop's fables: they're showing us the heart of God.

