

Homily for Trinity XXIII - The Parable of the Talents

We are coming to the end of a year with St Matthew's Gospel. For some weeks now we have been treated to a different parable each Sunday in the Gospel and bidden to reflect upon it and to apply the message of the parable to our own lives.

The Parable of the Talents presents many layers of meaning even though it seems so blunt and straightforward when read through. Let us begin today by remembering that the Parables were vivid and arresting stories told by Jesus that were anchored in the real day to day experience of people living in Judea in the time of Our Lord. Christ spoke of things as they were in his day.

One of the keys to understanding the parables better is to reveal the words as they would likely have been heard in Our Lord's time. So, here is a bit of historical context.

First. It was common then, as now, for the wealthy to have servants who did their master's bidding.

Second: It was also common for the wealthy to go away for indefinite times and leave the matters of their estates, households, business dealings etc in the hands of trusted servants.

It was also common for the master to give differing responsibilities to servants according to their experience, capability, trustworthiness and so forth.

Thirdly. On return, the servants would be expected to give a full report on how they had carried out their master's wishes.

So the framework of this parable would have been well understood and accepted as everyday, if you like, by the disciples who heard it for the very first time.

What was given to each servant was also well understood in our Lord's time but it is seldom understood as well today for the simple reason that a "talent" is nowadays a largely unknown quantity. A talent was a certain weight of coins of precious metal, so the value of a talent of coins depended on whether they were gold coins, silver coins or copper coins. The best estimate of the value of a talent of silver coins in today's Australian currency is approximately one million dollars. That's right approximately one million dollars... a lot of money. When our Lord spoke to his disciples about Talents he was speaking of lots of money. A Talent is a seriously large sum of money.

So the story went like this to Our Lord's disciples, who were the audience of this parable: A very wealthy man, who was going abroad indefinitely, handed his considerable

property in cash to three of his servants to look after during his absence. One was handed 5 million and other 2 million and the third was handed one million dollars.

The first 2 servants immediately began trading with the sums of money that had been entrusted to them but the third person simply buried his in the ground. Immediately Our Lord's hearers would have thought to themselves ... *"Uh Oh.... I bet there'll be trouble for that man later on in this story"* as they would all have known full well that servants entrusted with, let's say it again... huge sums..., were expected to trade and to invest with the sum of money in order to make a profit for their master in his absence. They knew that the master's money had to be put to work and that involved the servants getting to work as well!

It all turned out just as any of Our Lord's listeners would have expected. The first 2 servants were highly commended for the use they had made of the money entrusted to them. Both had doubled their masters' money during his absence. The third servant was roundly condemned for burying the money in a field and castigated for not even going to the minimal effort that would be required to deposit the sum in a bank where it would earn interest.

Most Bible commentary on this parable comes to all sorts of conclusions about human talents and how God gives different talents to different people as they try to explain the significance of why one was given 5 talents, another 2 and the third one. In the process, many commentators miss the basic and most obvious point of the parable which is this.... Our Lord expects us to work. To use what we have been given for the advancement of the Kingdom of Heaven. There is no room in the Kingdom for passengers or loafers who achieve precisely nothing because they do nothing.

Here is one rather frightening but deeply true thought that comes out of the parable of the 3 servants: Idleness is as much a rejection of God as wickedness. The stern correction and condemnation uttered by the Master to the lazy servant who did nothing will be ours if we fall into the same category... *"You wicked and slothful servant"* and *"cast the worthless servant into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

Many of you will have heard me say this before... there is no such thing as retirement in the Church. While we are able, we continue to our dying day in our willing service of the Lord and his Kingdom, all the while making the best use we can of our abilities and our present situation in life. I might not be able to do what I once could but as life unfolds other opportunities arise.

The reward of work well done is that there is still more work to do. The two servants who had done well were given greater tasks and greater responsibility in the work of the master. St Paul puts this reality very well indeed for us when he says... *‘Continue to work out your salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will, and to act, according to His purposes.’* Philippians 2: 12 -13