of talents and trust

a sermon preached on the

23rd sunday after pentecost

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by mother emily fraser

the lections: Judges 4:1-10; Psalm 90; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30.

Last week in her sermon Dorothy Lee mentioned that the parable of the ten young girls is one of those texts that preachers fear to draw in the lectionary's selection of gospel texts for Sunday services. Well, today's passage from the Gospel according to Matthew, which immediately follows it, is another one that the preacher has to approach with caution and deep, prayerful contemplation.

You'd be right to ask why the passage may fill the preacher with trepidation. What is it about this passage that poses a difficulty?

Well, before delving into that, some background. Jesuit New Testament scholar Brendan Byrne notes that this parable, along with the parable of the two servants and the parable of the ten young girls, "is the third in a series of parables dealing with the proper attitude to and behaviour in the face of the coming Son of Man". Rudolf Schnackenburg notes a distinct difference between the previous two and this third parable. "While other parables summon to watchfulness and readiness, the point [of this parable] is life in the world – the observance of the will of God in deed".

So what we have here in the parable of the talents is a lesson about living with the expectation of the coming reign of God, symbolised by the second coming of Christ. This deserves more exploration, and I'll return to this later.

So, onto the thorny areas this passage opens before us.

Firstly, the Gospel can be taken as an allegory about our God-given talents, with an underlying message that we are not to hide our talents (that is, to be the slave who buried their single talent in the ground where it could do nothing and gain nothing). We are called to be people who use our talents to the full, building them up, letting them grow, and this will please God who has given us these talents. This lesson arises from those slaves whose work is commended, their talents doubled, and who earn the praise of their master with the words 'well done, good and trustworthy slave' and then receive their reward.

This is a message which is encouraging, allowing people to search for that for which they have a talent, and to pursue it with all their heart and to the best of their ability. This is a positive message, the type of message which we hope to hear from the Gospel each time we take our seats in the pews. This is Christianity which uplifts.

One big problem with this interpretation of the parable is that it sells the parable short. Professor Daniel J. Harrington remarks that "the usual moralizing approach to Matthew 25:14-30 ('use your talents to the best of your ability') does not take into account the eschatological horizon that is essential to the passage". And there is an eschatological horizon to the passage, it does address the end of days, the coming of the Lord at the end of time and the rendering of an account as to all that we have and all that we have done. But there is slippery territory here too.

We need to remember that this is not to be taken literally. Jesus' parables were designed as prompts to learning and reflection; they are not necessarily literal descriptions of what might happen. None of us knows exactly what will happen, but what we can usefully do is to consider what this parable and its tale of a reckoning can teach us about

how we can live now – with enthusiasm, not lazily, and not with fear but with hope. Because the slave who buries the treasure lives in fear; fear of the master they see as cruel and unfair, greedy, taking what they did not earn in reaping where they did not sow and gathering where they did not scatter.

And secondly, the parable is difficult because of its ending, where the slave who buried the trusted entrusted to him in the ground, neither increasing it nor losing it, is punished so severely – called wicked and lazy, condemned by the master, their single talent taken and given to the most successful slave, and then thrown out of the presence of the master, into 'the outer darkness'. The parable ends on a note that is dark, discomforting, unless you focus on the fate of the most successful slave who receives yet more, in accordance with the master's words that *to all those who have, more will be given.*

So this parable is potentially dangerous because it seems to direct us in the way of prosperity doctrine, where success and wealth and power are the rewards of God for the obedient and devout. This lesson encouraging the gathering of wealth and power strikes a dissonant chord in comparison with the other Gospel narratives about wealth and the use of money. In his commentary on the passage, Brendan Byrne comments that the parable seems to "endorse a highly capitalistic mode of proceeding in regard to the use of wealth, which sits ill with Jesus' instruction on the use of money elsewhere". This seems far removed from the image of Christ cleansing the temple, turning out the money-lenders with shouts, upending their tables and brandishing a whip! The parable of the talents sounds more like it's from the Gospel according to Ayn Rand, rather than the Gospel of Christ.

Brendan Byrne acknowledges yet another difficulty with the parable, and it concerns the figure of the master. He states that, "if the reckoning the returning businessman makes with his servants has allegorical reference to the final judgement, a none-too-attractive image of the deity seems to emerge". This is a reasonable conclusion. The parable may leave us thinking that either Christ or God will behave as the master – harsh, reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not scatter. This can leave us in fear rather than inspired, responding to God not out of love, but out of a sense of fretful obedience. And the Christian response to God should be one of love, not fear. When holy fear is spoken of, it is a sense of awe which leads to reverence, not numbing terror that renders us inert, and these are two very different emotional states.

So, all in all, what are we to draw from this parable?

Daniel Harrington summarises that the parable "recommends responsible activity ... its emphasis is on positive action as opposed to fearful and/or lazy inactivity". and suggests that "it is usually taken as an exhortation directed to Christians, who should work diligently in the present and avoid laziness and fear in the face of the Son of Man's coming".

So we should not take it too literally, but we should learn from it as to how we can live our lives now, conscious of all that we have been given and faithfully considering our responsibilities to those around us and to God in order that we faithfully live out our faith and our calling to be people who are known by love.

Because, if we have a talent which is to be valued far beyond all others, it is our ability to love, and share that love, as Christ shared his love with those he encountered, freely and without bounds.

curate.emily@stjohnscamberwell.org.au