

'The Wages of Fear' a sermon preached by Jay Robinson, at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 19 November 2023. Gospel reading Matthew 25:14-30

Dear God,
Help us to see what's in front of us in your holy Word,
and to come to understand it as best we can.
Amen.

This is a test.

We are given a challenging gospel reading today, the Parable of the Talents. Our job will be to interpret its meanings, and to try to come up with some answers. I'm reminded of this test-pressure, as university students crammed to finish tests in the past fortnight. Hewitson Library where I work was buzzing. The library is now quiet again, as the students have passed their tests (or not), and have been released out into the lightness, into the summer.

The slaves in today's parables were also tested. Two passed, and one failed, as least according to the most common interpretation of the text. Here's the setup: it's a story of three slaves, told over three parts. Matthew is fond of threes. And it is a handy number for storytelling: it's easier to remember for the telling and to hear for the understanding.

The story begins with a wealthy landowner going away on a journey. He appoints three slaves to manage three different amounts of money while he is gone; five, two, and one talents, respectively. A talent was originally a heavy weight of precious metal, which became the largest denomination of cash in its day: \$60,000 in today's money.

The second part is the long time that the master was away. During that time, the first two slaves invested and traded and doubled their money. The third one buried it, to keep it safe.

The third and closing part of the story is when the master returns and makes an accounting with the slaves. The first two brought their principal and earnings to the master and he was well-pleased. He rewarded them with more responsibilities.

The third slave brought his principal, one talent and said, "here, this is yours." He said he was afraid of the master and so took no risks with the money. He told him why he was afraid, describing how he saw him as a harsh master who took what others had laboured over.

The master then belittled him, gave his one talent to the slave with ten talents, and pronounced judgment, casting him out into the darkness. Matthew describes this outer darkness up to a half-dozen times in his gospel, as a place "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Not a nice place!

For the past two thousand years there have been a lot of interpretations of this passage. The most common one boils down to a morality tale about using God's gifts wisely. The master is often seen as God, generous and trusting of his slaves' abilities. This master is gone a long time, with that absence heightening the slaves' responsibilities for what they have been given. Early Christians might have heard this and been heartened to live and serve whilst they were waiting for the second coming of Christ.

The key to this interpretation is what the slaves *do* with the money entrusted to them. Two slaves traded their talents, to be praised as "good and trustworthy slaves." They used their gifts to benefit the master. The third slave buried it, with no benefit to the master. This was a customary practice

then, to protect from theft. But instead of being praised, he was condemned as “wicked and lazy.” This slave sees a harsh master who inspires only fear. So he had misunderstood his gift’s purpose and his master’s generous intentions.

This means that as disciples of Jesus, God gives us generous gifts, and we are meant to use them wisely. Even though we each receive different gifts, the point is to *use* them. The first two take faithful risks, and are rewarded with “joy,” presumably in God’s kingdom. The third one seeks only to save his own skin. That works for a while, until the master returns and the judgment is cast: to the outer darkness, away from God’s kingdom.

This interpretation is so common that the Greek word *talanton* become the root for the English, Spanish, and Italian words for “talent” – which means a God-given or natural gift. And it comes in very handy for Stewardship Sunday, alongside other “use your gifts” Bible texts, of which there are several. This reading is quite meaningful and quite helpful, as far as that goes.

But, hang on – is it really the most plausible interpretation? Is it closest to what Jesus actually meant in the time he was telling it, and to whom he was telling it? I admit that I had niggles of doubt when I first read this passage, this time around for preaching it. Among other things I might immediately question, it had reference to earning interest with a banker, and it endorsed capitalistic money-making practices.

The harshness of the punishment for the third slave was particularly striking to me. After all, he if anything had committed just a sin of omission, in not investing the talent. His inaction had not actively wronged anyone, and he did return what he had been given. If the master was meant to represent God, would God be that harsh? And this suggests that the third slave did indeed have the right to be fearful, anticipating such a response.

So I kept digging into my research, through and past many commentaries that suggested the interpretation I’ve just shared with you, amongst others. I did find a few though that suggested a reading of this text that is the opposite of most interpretations. Namely, what if the third slave was the one who *got it right*? He’s still the focal point of the parable, but just in a different and surprising way, at least to our ears.

Rev BB Tumi Senokoane presented this view very well, and I will draw heavily upon his work, to explain it. Rev Senokoane is a pastor in the United Reforming Church in Southern Africa, and he is an associate professor in theological ethics at the University of South Africa.

He approaches his work from the point of view of a black theologian, and as one who understands the struggles of working people. In particular, he points out three problematic aspects of the text:

- The problem of servanthood
- The problem of inequality
- The problem of capitalism

As per the problem of servanthood, it is important to distinguish between servanthood and slavery. Servants are hired. Slaves are owned. Quite often the Bible camouflages the word ‘slave’ under the word ‘servant.’ And while slaves in those days could achieve fairly high status within a household, for example being a steward, they were still slaves. Their fate and their treatment were entirely controlled at the whims of their master.

While there are a half-dozen Greek words that can mean ‘servant,’ there is only one, *doulos*, that means ‘slave.’ *Doulos* is used in this parable, throughout. I read eight older translations of the New Testament text, and they all used the word ‘servant’ in English. It appears that only by the time of

the publication of the New Revised Standard Version (in 1991), did the translation catch up to use 'slave,' as the word *doulos* prescribes.

As a slave wholly dependent upon his master, the third slave had to overcome his fear in order to speak out so plainly as he did to the master. And he paid the price for it. He was cast into the darkness.

All of this is problematic more broadly speaking, in that this text (as Rev Senokoane puts it), "naturalises the parasitical role of the aristocratic class within the agrarian mode of production." In other words, it depicts the master as a willing benefactor of the exploitation of slave labour. All of this is normal, the story suggests: the master "reaps where he did not sow and gathers from where he did not winnow."

As per the second problem, that of inequality, we can ask these questions: Who was Jesus' audience for this parable? Likely they were peasants of first-century Palestine. Would they have cheered on the landowner in the story? Or his first two slaves, the lackeys who did his bidding? Not likely. Rather they would have been seen as the villains, and the third slave (who resisted) as the hero.

So this parable is not good news to the peasant, as it normalises, praises, and promotes inequality between the master and servants, and amongst the servants themselves. Jesus had made clear that the master's perception of the servants' abilities is what determined the differences in amounts that were entrusted to them.

Finally, as to the problem of capitalism, there is a striking similarity between the ideas in the parable and tenets of modern capitalism, at least to Western eyes. The text seems to be praise of homespun capitalism, from the lips of Jesus. In exegesis from Chrysostom to Calvin and beyond, this motif has rarely been questioned. But the labourers who were listening to Jesus could have seen how the third slave's burial of the talent was actually an act of non-cooperation. That slave was not going to participate in the money-grubbing games that the first two slaves likely used to double their money so quickly. After all, a talent was worth fifteen years of a working-person's wages back then. Where did all that money come from then, for the doubling of such huge amounts? From "reaping where they did not sow, and gathering where they did not winnow." That, practically speaking, is a definition of capitalism, from the sceptical viewpoint of a peasant.

The third slave withheld his labour and thus put a spanner in the works. And he paid the price for it. He was cast into the darkness.

Jesus himself was soon enough cast into the darkness. When he was crucified, per Mt 27:45, "From noon on, *darkness* came over the whole land, until three in the afternoon." Crucifixion was excruciating by definition, with much weeping and gnashing of teeth. And then he died and went straight on to hell, where that pain was magnified further. We rejoice that on the third day Jesus was resurrected, but he had to *go through hell* to get there.

Jesus would have anticipated his own suffering, by the time of his last public discourse in which this parable was a part. In that, perhaps his message was as subversive as ever: that the lowly one who does not cooperate with the oppressive powers of the world will be exalted. Or, as he concluded that discourse with the story of the separation of the sheep and the goats, "as you did it to one of

the least of these, you have done it to me.” That includes the casting out of the defiant slave, for Jesus himself being cast out.

Jesus’ listeners that day could reckon with that message, being trampled over, themselves. Jesus may have spoken a cautionary tale foreshadowing his death, rather than telling a stewardship parable, here.

What I have done here today with you is to cast a hermeneutic of suspicion over the text. Per the Oxford Academic Dictionary, a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ means that “words may not always mean what they seem to mean.” For example, this could be if and when Jesus is misunderstood by those who shared his language, culture, and religion, only to be understood for the first-time by later commentators who didn’t share those things.

Uh-uh. His audience likely understood him as he spoke. And, if we can see with that audience’s eyes, we can understand, too. We can see real-life landowners and farmers, the money involved and the exploitation. Remember, this parable does not begin with “The Kingdom of God is like ...”, as so many of his parables do. It begins “For it is as if a man, going on a journey ...” *God* is not the landowner, but rather the landowner is a too-real person with too much sway. We can cut through the eons of interpretation that ignore or minimise the red flags that I’ve raised here today, and see the story that is right in front of us, as it was told to us.

I give the final word today to Black Hawk, the Sauk Indian leader who fought a war to retain possession of the land that was to become my home state of Iowa. He said, “How smooth must be the language of the whites, when they can make right look like wrong, and wrong like right.”

Amen.

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Knox Church
449 George Street
Dunedin
New Zealand
Ph. (03) 477 0229
www.knoxchurch.org.nz
minister@knoxchurch.org.nz