

Haslingfield Sermon, 19th November 2023
Matthew 25:14-30 – The Parable of the Talents

You all know this parable, I'm sure. Perhaps you also know what it means. I've tended to hear it as a call to develop our talents. Don't hide your light under a bushel but get out there and grow. From those to whom much has been given, much will be expected. I'd be interested to know what else you've heard in this parable over the years.

But when I read the parable again more recently, I found myself drawn, almost exclusively, to the one-talent-slave. I'm really, really curious about him. He is described as 'wicked and lazy', but the more I read the more I question it and the more I find that something else is moving into the foreground. Fear. 'I knew that you were a harsh man ... so I was afraid.' What made him so afraid? In particular, why is he so afraid that he's paralysed, while his fellow slaves clearly aren't afraid? In fact, they seem to have been liberated to flourish and expand in a gloriously praiseworthy way. What went wrong for the one-talent-slave?

I've had cause of late, through the contacts I've had with various people, to reflect on the diversity of experience which can happen within families. Siblings brought up in the same household with, apparently, the same childhood experiences, who yet turn into very different individuals who not only go on to lead very different lives, but who look back on those early formative experiences with very different eyes. What was a childhood full of security, wonder and formation for one child, may have been oppressive, judgmental and damaging to a sibling, with consequences, for them both, which can last a lifetime. Those of us who work in education are very well aware of the effect of ACEs – Adverse Childhood Experiences – which are significant even before birth – and include things such as living in a household where there is domestic violence, substance abuse, acute poverty, neglect, abuse etc. We understand that such experiences not only mean that children

experience trauma, but that this will seriously affect their brain development, which in turn affects things like cognition, self-regulation, attention span, emotional responses, aggression etc. Such children are already at a marked disadvantage from their peers before they ever reach a classroom, and their life chances, even in a good and caring school environment, are going to be far more reduced because they are not able to use the opportunities which come their way as productively as those who have not experienced ACEs.

You may be wondering what this has to do with Jesus' parable of the talents. When I read this parable today, my attention is drawn to the culture of fear which seems to shroud the one-talent-slave; a fear which squeezes the imagination and hope and confidence out of him, such that his existence and his future ends up utterly condemned: banished 'to the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' From the place in which I stand right now, reading this parable, I want to say 'that's not fair! What's holding back the slave from fulfilling his potential? What obstacles need to be removed? What support has he got to raise aspirations and to believe in his capacity to grow what he has?' Surely, in preserving the one talent he has, he is showing that his experience has taught him that if you display your talent it is going to get damaged, lost or stolen. So the best thing, to mitigate the punishment which is coming your way anyhow, is to keep it safe. For our one-talent-slave, preservation is an active decision for the good. Yet our master fulfils the slave's fearful prophecy of punishment by telling him it was the wrong decision. Some people can't win however hard they try! Is it any wonder they give up and opt out, so disenfranchised from the workings of society that they will no longer seek to live by those values? Perhaps that, indeed, is an expression of 'outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth', and that's where many people exist right now because of lack of opportunity and support, and the overwhelming odds which have always been stacked against them.

What, then, do we do with this parable? Are we to reflect that the kingdom of God is actually perpetuating the inequalities of this world? By no means. Such a reading would be completely at odds with the good news of the gospel message as revealed elsewhere.

OK, in that case is my reading of this parable today simply wrong and misguided? Well, no. The gospel speaks anew into each generation and into each circumstance, and a big imperative of the gospel is to shine a light into places of darkness and to bring to light the things that are hidden. We therefore need to apply the gospel to the circumstances in which we find ourselves and ask the gospel to reveal new truths to us. The gospel is, after all, the word of life, not a fossilized relic, so we should expect it to keep revealing new truths which we have not hitherto seen or understood.

What this parable is currently saying to me, as I read it through the lens of disadvantage, is not about working harder and getting a divine handshake at some celestial awards ceremony, with a certificate announcing that you're now 'a good and faithful servant'. What I'm hearing in this parable is a challenge. Maybe we shouldn't necessarily be identifying with the three slaves ourselves right now. Maybe we can take a step back and consider what we're doing to resource, equip, enable others to grow their talents. How do we help others to flourish? That may be in quite practical, task-driven ways, by encouraging people to try new things and doing whatever we need to do to enable them to take opportunities as they arise. It might be on a more relational level, affirming a positive and worthy image of someone close to us, expressing belief in their abilities or judgement, valuing them for who they are, expecting the best rather than the worst, refraining from belittling or patronising, choosing words which build up. I cannot stress enough how important this is for young people to hear, because the noise in the world, which otherwise fills their airwaves, is often unhealthy and polarising. It may be on a more strategic level by the way

in which we vote, the political ideologies we endorse or challenge, and the contribution we make to public life such as serving on local councils or as a school governor and so on.

I want to end with one final reflection on this parable. The five-talent-slave receives the highest possible accolade: 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' What does that say to you? Perfection; success; a pay-rise and final salary pension? He has made it, but then he clearly started out with bucket-loads of confidence and self-belief; he was always going to make it. Now, did you notice a key little phrase at the start of the parable? The talents were distributed 'to each according to their ability'. So, yes, it's no surprise Mr Five Talents did so well. But then we get to the two-talent-slave. His ability was clearly much, much less than Mr Five Talents, and sure enough he only produced two extra talents, which isn't worth as much as five talents to the master who owns them all. But notice that his praise wasn't in any way muted. It wasn't 'fairly well done, adequate slave; you haven't made a complete hash of this, so I'll put you on the next step of the ladder and let's see what you can do with three talents'. No, it was an identical affirmation of worth and the same invitation 'into the joy of your master'.

Our growth, our 'achievements' (in life and in faith), don't need to be spectacular. Our different starting points are largely irrelevant. What matters is that the light of the gospel illuminates the dark places in our lives and brings life-giving growth. Christ's is the love which banishes fear and offers the resurrection life. If we are aware of that, if we have known it and been transformed by it, can we do all that is possible to remove the obstacles from those who are yet to be touched by that light. Amen.