

The unimaginative servant
1Thess 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30

19 November 2017

I wonder if anyone had the chance to see the new film *Paddington 2*? Apparently, it is a lovely sequel to the earlier film, *Paddington* made in 2014. The actor Hugh Grant, who is in *Paddington 2* was interviewed about his role and about his relationship to the cute little bear. In the interview Grant said *Paddington's* character is the opposite of his own, as the bear sees the best in people, whereas he, Grant, tends to see the worst. Then he added something that to some might sound slightly sacrilegious, but says a lot about the actor, 'I think *Paddington* is right and I am wrong. Maybe, my new motto in life should be "what would *Paddington* do?"

What is not discussed in the interview is the more interesting question, what are the consequences of the way we see people. What difference does it make whether we approach people by imagining them to be basically good or deciding in advance that we can't expect too much of them? In a way, I think both of our Bible readings for today have something to say on the matter that may help us to answer this question. The Apostle Paul, writing to the young church in Thessalonica encourages them to look forward to the Day of the Lord in a positive frame of mind because of knowing what they know of God through Jesus Christ.

The parable of the unprofitable servant in Matthew's Gospel is part of a series of discourses that conclude Jesus' teachings before he reaches Jerusalem, the final place of his journey and also of his life. Last Sunday we heard about the wise and foolish bridesmaids and next Sunday's reading is the story of the sheep and goats at the Final judgement. In the context of these parables the crowds have left and Jesus is on the Mount of Olives surrounded only by his disciples, who are questioning him about the end times. But the context of the Gospel – just like Paul's letter to the Thessalonians - is the embattled community of the early Christian church some 30-50 years after Jesus' death, who are struggling with the long wait before the promised return of Jesus. Because of this it is not an easy task to disentangle Jesus' original purpose in telling the parable from Matthew's purpose in re-telling it.

As the story appears in all three of the synoptic Gospels (that is Matthew, Mark and Luke), it is fascinating to see how the earliest version from Mark grows in the telling according to the needs of Matthew's and Luke's different 'congregations' and according to the particular personal views of the Gospel writers themselves. And, the chain of interpretation does not end there, because reading it here in our current situation we have to make sense of it for our own use and try to discover what God might want to say to us through it today. In order to do that we are faced with some questions, like: Is this parable about money and economics? Or is it about the use of our natural gifts, we might call talents? Is this story, like the one about the sheep and the goats, about the Final Judgement, which will decide who goes to heaven or who goes to hell? Does the master signify Christ or God?

Well, to start with the money, a good case could be made out that Jesus wants to teach his followers about the wise arrangements of their personal finances. He wants to draw their attention to the fact that any riches they may possess comes from God and belongs to God, so they will have to account for it before God. That wealth has to be made to work, it has to produce growth, and that simply keeping it safe is not a wise thing to do. This interpretation may have been of some use to a few wealthy people around Jesus, but would this high finance be a major issue for most of Jesus' audience? Would it be helpful to the out-of-work fishermen, the redundant tax collectors, or for the over-taxed country folk, who made up the majority of Jesus' followers? And who would most likely have sympathised with the third servant, who prudently buried his money in the ground for safe-keeping. Isn't it more likely though that Jesus, who, by all accounts, didn't have personal riches of his own and had to rely on others' generosity for his every-day needs, is not talking about money at all? One wonders what he would make of last week's news that a picture of his by Leonardo da Vinci fetched \$450 million?

So, if it's not about money, is it about our natural gifts, the talents we were born with as John Calvin, the great Reformer thought? The other day we were talking about some people's gift of learning languages, or being brilliant musicians, or painting beautiful pictures like the ones displayed on our corridor. We noted that these things can be learnt to a certain extent, but there are those among us, who far surpass that, which can be learnt by everybody. They

have a natural gift for it. And, of course this isn't just true for these outstanding giftings. There are those, who are naturally good listeners, who are good at hospitality, who have a knack of teaching, or organising, or caring for others. Surely, it would make sense to think, as Calvin did that Jesus wants his disciples to use all their natural abilities in the service of God both inside and outside of the Church because it will bring them closer to God. And that those, who do not use their gifts 'profitably', exclude themselves from a happier, more fulfilled life.

But on closer reading we find that the parable – certainly in Matthew's telling – is not concerned with the natural gifts we all have. The master entrusts his servants with bags of gold, "to one he gave five bags of gold, to another two, to another one, *each according to his ability*." It seems then that the great treasure they all receive is on top of, and according to their already existing natural abilities. And it is truly a great treasure we are talking about here. Although our translation calls them bags of gold, others call them talents, their current value would be around a £1 million for smallest amount, 2 million and 5 million for the others. But maybe their precise value is not the real issue, we are just meant to think of some amazing gifts that a generous master entrusts to his servants.

And if that was all, we may be right to identify the master with Jesus or God. But it isn't. As the story unfolds we learn that the third servant does not see his master like that at all. In his imagination he is a hard and exacting, success-orientated, money-grubbing master, who is out for the greatest profit at the least expense, someone to be feared, for he doesn't tolerate failure and punishes those who don't come up to scratch. Is this the Jesus we know from the rest of the NT? The Jesus who went out of his way to side with the outsiders, the losers, the unsuccessful? Is this the God that Jesus portrayed in all his teachings, including the unforgettable figures of the Good Shepherd and the prodigal son's father? So maybe this parable is not telling people how things will be but how things are. Jesus' audience would have known many of these harsh masters, whose only interest was to increase their own profits and who thoughtlessly trampled over anybody who got in their way. Who produced a world where the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. And if we want to be honest, don't we know something about that world too?

So, this is a difficult parable with no simple answers. Because of its position in Matthew's Gospel, we can say with some certainty that it is concerned with the behaviour of Jesus' followers as they await his promised return. And in that context the talents, the great treasure they are entrusted with do not represent either money, or people's natural abilities, but the one thing that their master left with them, the gift of the great vision of God's kingdom. What will they do with it? How will they take care of it? Will their stewardship make it grow, or stagnate? These are the questions that are as relevant to us today as they were to Jesus' earliest followers. The parable shows two different ways of dealing with it and gives a surprising explanation for the difference.

In the case of the third servant it is stated explicitly: "*I knew you to be a hard man...*" he says to his master as he is called to account. It is the way he imagines his master that determines his action, or rather inaction. He has been given an enormous gift but whatever he thinks he knows of his master paralyses him, and in his fear he closes in on himself, hides away the gift – and all because he assumes the worst. As a result he is being judged according to his imagination, as one commentator puts it. In the Luke version the master actually tells his servant: "*I will condemn you out of your own mouth*" (Luke 19: 22). In contrast, the other two servants seem to relish the opportunity and realise what great trust their master has put in them by giving them such treasure. They see a risk-taking man with overflowing generosity, and for his sake they, themselves become willing risk-takers as they make their master's business their own. Their vision of him sustains them, encourages them, they are not concerned with themselves, they are not working for themselves, they are working for him.

To translate it for our use, it matters what kind of God we visualise for ourselves. Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians drives home the point, when he says to those fearing a harsh judgement: "*God has not destined us for retribution*", in other words, we are not going to be judged according to our just deserts. We are children of light not of darkness. We were destined for a free and full life in and with Jesus Christ. As we come to the Lord's Table it is our prayer that the Christ we encounter there will heal our imagination and will give us a true vision of God, which keeps growing in us day by day until it overflows and blesses everyone around us.

Let it be so.