

Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 15 November 2020

Traditionally, this passage has usually been known as the parable of the talents but I noticed the NIV translation which we have just heard calls it the parable of the bags of gold. That set me thinking.

Today, we use the word talent in the sense of it being an ability or a natural gift we possess. The master who leaves is Jesus and, as trustworthy and faithful servants we assume responsibility to put our natural gifts and talents to work for God. Fair enough, I don't think we can argue with that – creative and successful use of our talents for the kingdom's sake can be no bad thing.

But, that is the modern meaning of talent. In Jesus' day a talent was not an ability or natural gift but a specific weight of silver or gold. Various calculations have been made but taking the average of those I came across, in today's terms 5 talents of gold would be worth between £30-50 million.

That's the sort of absurd money which was routinely and recklessly gambled by banks in the 2008 financial crash or the amount of life savings lost by folk in this country to financial scammers in the last few years.

In 1 Timothy it says that 'love of money is the root of all evil' so with that in mind let's have a few minutes of what if..... what if Jesus isn't the master in this story.

In Jesus' day there were very limited ways to legitimately enhance or increase wealth. Manual and often back breaking work was the means by which most people literally scratched out a living. Even then, they had to pay taxes out of their meagre earnings.

The privileged few became enriched from these taxes as did the tax collectors after skimming off some of the money for themselves. Banditry was rife and the romantic ideal surrounding Robin Hood of robbing the rich to give to the poor was a non starter, more often than not it would be the poor robbing the even poorer.

Even the majority of a prostitute's earnings went to her pimp...and so on. For the servants to have doubled their master's wealth, effectively means that they were party to either someone else being hurt, cheated or treated unjustly and the master would have known this. That doesn't sound like the Jesus I know.

The words of the 3rd servant supports this view....he describes the master as a hard man; harvesting where he had not sown and gathering where he had not scattered seed.

That sounds like immorality and cheating at the very least to me. And what's more, the master condemns this servant for not being like the other two.

Yet, for thousands of years, the traditional and safest way to preserve and safeguard valuables has been to bury it – indeed only last week there was news of an 11th century horde of coins being found by archeologists in Suffolk. Yet this 3rd servant is condemned for being a prudent and careful steward of his master's gold.

What's more the master rages at the servant for not even putting his money on deposit to receive interest even though Jews were forbidden by Old Testament scripture to receive interest on money lent to other Jews. That doesn't sound like the Jesus I know.

And the reward given to the first two servants for having doubled their master's wealth is to share in his happiness – gospel speak for salvation. That doesn't sound like the Jesus I know whose message was that salvation was not a reward but a gift, given freely by God's grace of invitation.

Who then was the master? Well, that really depends on whom you identify the 3rd servant to be, because if you take Jesus as the master, then the 1st and 2nd servants must be Christ's faithful and trustworthy followers and the 3rd lazy and untrustworthy servant describes the Pharisees.

The Pharisees had been given responsibility for two priceless gifts: the Law of Moses and the Temple, a sign of God's presence amongst the people of Israel. But the Pharisees had failed to act responsibly. Instead, they had selfishly kept it for themselves, not wanting anything, including their special status, to change.

They had, as it were, buried the gift to preserve it, just as it was. In that scenario they become the worthless servant and will soon have their gift taken away from them when they are cast out into the darkness, following the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in AD70.

BUT what if... you identify Jesus as the 3rd servant? The one who refused to engage with the shenanigans of the other two servants in exploiting the poor or acting immorally or unjustly. The servant who actually saw the Pharisees for what they truly were and wasn't afraid to publicly name and shame them.

The servant who was ruthlessly rejected by the master, tied up and thrown out into the darkness where, in their opinion, he would get his just deserts.

IF you identify Jesus as the 3rd servant then the Pharisees become the master.

What if...this parable is yet another example of the upside down kingdom where we should expect the unexpected - echoing Jesus' teaching that the last shall be first and the first shall be the last.

Fortunately, we are Easter people, we can understand that. Unfortunately, for the Phariseesthey did not.... and the rest, as they say....is history.

Amen

