

When a parable is NOT about the kingdom...

What on earth is today's parable about? As storytelling goes it seems a bit of a mess. What do we make of it? Or learn from it?

It's like the parable in Matthew about the three servants given talents and left to get on with it, but it's not really the same.

It's got this weird story of a King who is unlikable, so we presume the King doesn't represent God.

It's a muddle. Ten servants are given money and told to trade yet we only hear about what happens to three of them. What about the other seven??

In my research most scholars end up doing some hermeneutical gymnastics to show how this parable is about the kingdom of God. I'm going out on a limb here...I don't think it is!!

I'm sure you've all heard the joke about the minister giving the children's talk before they go out to Sunday School.

The Minister is describing something and asking the children what it is. It can be red or grey. It eats nuts. It has a long bushy tail. It leaps about in trees.

One child puts his hand up and the minister says "yes – what did I describe?"

The child replies "It's Jesus" then turns to his friend and says "to be honest it sounded like a squirrel but the answer is always Jesus".

Because parables are usually teaching us something about God's kingdom, we assume that today's parable story MUST BE about God's Kingdom. There is a lesson we can learn from it, but it's not

like the parable of the mustard seed, the pearl of great price, the wise and foolish builders, the lost sheep, the prodigal son.

All the different resources I researched left me with the unsatisfactory feeling that the obvious was being overlooked. This story is a squirrel! It's not about the kingdom of God. It's a story of the world as we know it.

The favourite explanation has been to suggest that our author, Luke, combined two stories, one about a king and one about servants being given money to trade. That overlooks one simple thing. Luke made a very careful study of Jesus' life, did his research and wrote a measured account of everything. He wouldn't make such a mistake.

What I did notice is that scholars don't really like this passage because they don't know what to make of it. The lessons are not immediately clear. It's not included in our usual 3 year lectionary. You won't have heard sermons on it very often, if at all.

The answer to this puzzling parable is the context. Context is everything.

In Luke chapter 18 Jesus takes the disciples to one side and tells them for the third time that he is going to be killed. They didn't understand what he was saying or talking about. So, they ignored it.

Then they come to Jericho. Jericho was the first city conquered by Joshua when the Hebrews came out of the desert into the promised land. It's a symbol, it has history.

In Jericho a blind man receives his sight and everyone is praising God. In Jericho a very rich man called Zacchaeus has his life turned upside down and finds salvation AND starts giving his

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wealth away. The disciples and all the followers of Jesus start to believe that God's kingdom is coming, and it will be ushered in as Jesus comes to Jerusalem. Jesus tells this story to deliberately burst their bubble.

It's a story of the way the world is. It's a story of how the world will go on being. It's the only parable where a real set of events are included.

The nobleman in the story is Herod Archelaus, one of Herod the Great's three sons. He was given Judea to rule but the people hated him (*in part because he killed about 3,000 of them putting down a rebellion*). When Archelaus travelled to Rome to have his kingship affirmed by the Romans, the Jews sent a delegation of 50 people to Rome to protest. They were ignored. There's no historical evidence to show Archelaus had his opponents put to death – but everyone would know the story of the king was based on Herod Archelaus.

Then around that real story (of the way the world is) Jesus weaves a version of another familiar story. Ten slaves are given a mina each (3 months wages) and told to trade. We only hear about three of them. One does really well and earns 10 times as much. One does pretty well and earns 5 times as much. One is frightened, makes nothing, not even any interest. As a result, nothing happens to the slave except his mina is taken away and given to the richest slave, because that's the way the world is, the rich get richer, the poor get poorer.

Then the King in the story has those opposed to him put to death.

There are things in this story that are obviously NOT the way God's Kingdom works.

A vindictive unliked king.

The suggestion the money should have been placed with the bankers to earn interest. In Jewish law this is strictly forbidden. The rich get richer and the poor and frightened have what's theirs taken away.

Why is Jesus telling them this story??

Because that is how the world is and that is how the world is going to be. God's kingdom was not about to come on earth with victory over the Romans and the religious rulers replaced.

Jesus is saying "this is the world you live in and is where you build God's Kingdom". I don't think the disciples took any more notice of this story than they did of Jesus saying he was going to be killed. They wanted everything to change.

Following the telling of this story, Luke documents the journey to Jerusalem, preparation for the last supper and the joyful entry going down the Mount of Olives. (Palm Sunday). The outpouring of praise for Jesus was associated with high hopes that God's kingdom was coming and then it all went wrong (as far as they were concerned). He was killed.

Then something did happen that is not the usual way of the world. The resurrection. Slowly, patiently, Jesus teaches his followers the meaning of faith, hope and love. Go into the world (the broken world as we know it) and make disciples. This parable is about growing the kingdom of God, in the broken kingdom of the world.

What then are the valuables we are given, with which to trade?

Sometimes it's money and we know that our giving sustains and allows the church to function. It's money that will achieve Transforming Trinity.

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We are also given the gifts of faith, hope and love. Of grace and kindness, friendship and compassion. The valuable gift of forgiveness and the gift of encouragement.

You cannot underestimate how valuable friendship is and we do that really well.

You cannot put a price on acceptance and we do that really well. I don't think we are rampant bible bashers forcing our story on those who don't wish to hear. I think we are people of faith, hope and love and will share what we have, when we can.

Be renewed in your commitment. Have confidence in Jesus' mission. Whatever the news, local national and international this week, don't tire of sowing seeds, watering and reaping.

We already know the end of the story...so while we have the time, let's do the work.

Rev. Jon Hutchinson, 7 August 2022