

## Sunday 19 November – Second Sunday before Advent

### Sermon by Harold Toms

Our Gospel reading this morning is one that I think has been amongst the most misused and misunderstood in the whole of the New Testament. The well-known parable of the talents (as it is commonly called) has been used as the basis for justifying the idea of the "prosperity Gospel". The idea that if we behave in the right way, belong to the right Church, and make the necessary contributions to that Church, we can expect to be rewarded with wealth and health. This interpretation of the parable uses it as an analogy in which the Lord is the master in the story and we are the slaves. The Lord then has given us these "talents" which we can use to generate wealth that we return, in part, to the Lord and like the slaves in the parable we will "enter into the joy of the master". In this understanding of the story there is no place for God's grace in salvation, which becomes entirely the consequence of our own works and the way in which we use our talents to generate a return, some of which we return to the giver of those talents. Nowhere in the teachings of Jesus, or anywhere else in the Bible is such an interpretation justified. Indeed, the Bible teaches us that:

"... the love of money is the root of all of evil" 1 Timothy 6:10

as Paul tells his young follower Timothy. Jesus also warns His followers in many places to guard against greed warning that:

"... it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God." Matthew 19:24

So whatever else Jesus is talking about in this parable He is emphatically not encouraging His disciples to use their talents to make as much money as they can. Wealth accumulated in this life has absolutely no worth in the context of all eternity, riches on earth do not correspond to riches in heaven, quite the reverse.

But that is not the only way in which this story has been misinterpreted over the years. There is also the slightly more insidious way that it is used as an encouragement for us to use our gifts, the word "talent" that we use as a synonym for gifts derives from this passage. By separating "talents" from a purely monetary meaning we might then think that we are being encouraged to use our wider, personal gifts in the Lord's service and that somehow this might

enable us to "enter into the joy of the master" like those slaves who generate a handsome return on the talents the master has given them. Again, this casts the Lord in the rôle of the master and us as the slaves seeking to earn the master's favour through our judicious use of his gifts to us. This also ultimately amounts to an idea of salvation through works which is contrary to what Paul tells us in his great letter to the Roman Church:

"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law." Romans 3:28

Our salvation is through God's good grace and not something that we achieve through perfect obedience to the law. This is absolutely not to say that we shouldn't attempt to do all the good that we can, how else could we really live out Jesus' commandment to love one another, and to love even our enemies, but we should never believe that in so doing we are earning favour with God.

Well, I've talked enough about what the parable doesn't mean, perhaps I need to start talking about what it does mean. For that we need to look at the whole of the passage as well as the stories with which it has been grouped. In the previous chapter (24) of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus teaches the disciples about the last days, the signs to look out for to know that the end is coming. All of the parables in that chapter are about keeping watch and being prepared for the coming of the Lord. Rather than giving us clues to try and work out when that will be, the thrust of the teaching is simply this: be prepared at all times for no one knows when the Lord will come.

Then there are these Kingdom parables, which each begin with the words "the kingdom of heaven will be like this". We had the previous parable as our Gospel reading last week, the story of the ten bridesmaids, five of whom remember to bring enough oil for their lamps and five of whom don't and so miss out when the bridegroom comes. The parable of the talents follows on from this and similarly effectively begins with an implied invitation. As the bridesmaids have clearly been invited to the wedding, so the slaves are invited to join in the work of their master. We shouldn't place too much emphasis on the number of talents each receives, or indeed the number of talents each earns from them. It is tempting, if we do so, to sympathise with that poor slave who receives just the one talent. The point here is that actually each is given a vast fortune to look after, we should consider even the one talent to equate to millions. In fact in Luke's version of this parable (chapter 19) each of ten slaves are given exactly the same amount. Just as with the bridesmaids the point of the story is about being ready, being prepared for the master's return. So how should we prepare for the Master's return. Jesus does not leave us in the dark. The final teaching in

Matthew 25, which is in fact Jesus' very last teaching for the disciples, is the one where he talks directly about the King's return. This time we really can equate Jesus with the one who returns. He tells those who, in His absence, have fed the hungry; given drink to the thirsty; welcomed strangers; clothed the naked; visited the sick or those in prison; that when they:

"... did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Matthew 25:40

Amen.

*An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk))*