

Some scripture readings appear to be quite straightforward especially those which tell us of what happened in a certain part of Jesus' life, or perhaps Paul's life, or if we look at the Old Testament it could be any one of those leaders like Moses or Abraham or prophets like Elijah or Elisha. And then some scripture readings are much harder to interpret. And it is often those passages where Jesus uses a parable to pass on a message to his audience which seem to have the largest number of different interpretations connected with them when I study the commentaries that I do as part of my preparation for talks like this.

The parable of the talents which we have just heard read is just one of those passages.

Many of us at various times of our lives have to face examinations. Some of those examinations are there to inform our teachers, our tutors, or our lecturers how much of what they have taught us we have taken in. Those exams are clearly of some importance but they are not going to determine whether we are allowed to pursue a certain career, or whether we will be allowed to join a new academic institution. The exams that determine these are at another level altogether.

Sadly there are still many people around who believe that in order to become a Christian, or perhaps more so as a Christian to be accepted into heaven, requires us to pass a sort of entrance exam. Some people believe that unless you have completed a certain number of tasks somehow the church will not accept you. I am hoping that nobody here today believes that. But in looking at the parable of the talents that is the sort of interpretation that I have seen put upon it. Unless you build on your talents, you will fail the exam.

Of course part of the confusion is down to the word talent. The talent that is referred to here is a monetary amount; it is not your skill at doing something. Having said that, it is interesting to observe that the meaning of the word talent that we do have comes directly from this parable as a talent in the parable represents roughly half of the lifetime earnings of someone. It is a monetary amount which could represent what someone can earn by using what they are good at.

By taking this incorrect interpretation of the parable people have said that what Jesus is saying here is that if you don't use the God given talents that you have then you will fail the entrance exam. That is not what is being said.

Another slightly different interpretation of the parable of the talents says this is all about what we as individuals do. Those interpretations focus on the man who was given 5 talents and the man who was given two talents and a man who was given one talent. And the first two, the person who was given 5 talents and the person who was given 2 talents are the good guys and the person who was given one talent and went away and hid it is the failure. I don't think that's what is being talked about here either.

As we have journeyed through Matthew's gospel this year we have on several occasions seen Matthew's love of explaining a message three times, or certainly in groups of 3 teachings. Today's reading is the third of a group of three. We have not included the previous two, but the first one was the story of the faithful or the unfaithful slave and how they acted when the master was away. The second was the parable of the 10 bridesmaids who were waiting for the bridegroom as he was away and was returning. And now we have the parable of the talents which starts off by saying, "Again it will be like a man going on a journey who called his servants and entrusted his property to them." When Matthew says, "Again it will be like" he is carrying on his theme from the previous two teachings where Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven – a phrase which Matthew uses to mean the Kingdom of God in heaven and on earth. The kingdom in which we live.

In each of these three cases the message that Matthew is trying to get across is what Jesus was saying about the period that we are now in. Jesus told his disciples first, that he was going; that he would be killed and then he would rise again. Jesus was then killed and rose again and ascended into heaven to be with his father leaving with us the Holy Spirit. So he had gone. And then Jesus said he would come again. In each of these 3 passages Jesus was talking about what happens between the 2nd and 3rd phases; between his first coming and his second coming.

And what has become clear to me is that this parable is not just about what individuals should do in this period of time but it is about what the church should do. Yes, it is important that we make use of the talents that we have, but this goes much wider than that.

The master, Jesus, has gone away entrusting something to his servants and those servants are you and me acting together as the church; the church as set up by Peter and Paul that we hear about in the Acts of the Apostles; the church that was in those days so radical that the authorities were scared of it; the church that saw such growth in terms of the number of people who became followers of Jesus that it should put us to shame today; the church that is carrying on the work today that Jesus left us to do.

So let's come back to those three people who the master left in charge of his property. To be left the sum of 5 talents, or to put it another way 2 1/2 times the average person's lifetime earnings, was a huge responsibility. Even to be left two talents or one talent was still a huge responsibility. To be left God's church is also a huge responsibility. And what did those first two servants do? They managed to double what had been left to them to look after. They couldn't have done that easily. It required a massive entrepreneurial spirit to be able to do such a thing. And the 3rd servants didn't lose what the master had left him, but the master was clearly unhappy that he didn't have that same entrepreneurial spirit in order to build on what had been left to him.

What this parable says to me today is that what we are missing in our churches, and I am not just referring to Fowlmere, Foxton, Shepreth and Thriplow but I am referring to so much of the Church of Jesus Christ today, is that entrepreneurial spirit that we need to build the church that has been left to us to look after.

I don't believe it is good enough to just carry on doing what we have always done to preserve what we have in our churches up and down the country. We need to become risk takers. There was a trend a few years ago and for all I know still might be happening in certain places where people would wear wristbands with WWJD on them standing for what would Jesus do. Would Jesus be satisfied with the church today? Perhaps you have your own views on that - I know I do.

But – and this is an absolutely enormous but – we must remember that in the parable of the talents the servants, that's us, were given 5 and 2 and 1 talent respectively, and none of them threw away those gifts. Even the servant who was given one talent still had that one talent when the master returned. What this is saying to me is that we have been given something very solid, and very generous, to care for – and we only have to look at the number of people who have attended funeral services in our churches in last few weeks to recognise that the church still has an importance to many people in the communities which we serve. Next month many hundreds of people will attend Christmas services in our churches. So we must care for our church – but to do that we must build it.

So how do we do that? Well, and this is going to sound a bit like I am contradicting everything I have just said, but we are approaching one of those times of the year when we need to ensure that we are individually prepared for what is to come. Are you prepared for your preparing, sounds a bit like a tongue twister, but the question reflects that today is the second Sunday before Advent – and Advent is a time of preparation.

Readings: 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11  
Matthew 25: 14-30

Title: God's entrepreneurs

St George's Thriplow  
All Saints' Shepreth

There will be plenty of opportunities over the next 6 weeks to talk about the first Christmas, and in two weeks time I will no doubt be talking about Advent in more detail. But Advent is one of the two periods of preparation in the church year – the other being Lent, the time of preparation leading up to Easter. In Advent we prepare ourselves for the coming of God in human form – and that can be in two ways: as a baby born at Christmas, and as the second coming. So it is a time when it is important to do something. There are many books around helping people to mark Advent, but I suggest a very simple method: Luke's gospel has 24 chapters. Why not read a chapter a day during December, finishing on Christmas Eve. Read the whole story during Advent – what better way is there to prepare? And this year, by Advent Sunday, it will already be the 3rd December – hence my encouragement today.

But let me finish today by going back to our first reading – from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. We have had two other readings from this letter in the last few weeks, and as my preparation for this sermon I read the whole thing – it doesn't take very long. And the whole letter is Paul reassuring the church in Thessalonica that they are doing a good job. It is a wonderfully encouraging letter and our extract this morning finished with these words: "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." I wonder if, in the parable of the talents, the first two servants had been a bit more encouraging of the third servant, the outcome may have been even better. So let us this morning commit ourselves to that time of individual preparation for Christmas which is Advent.

Let us celebrate Christmas ourselves, and encourage others to join us in our celebrations. And then in 2024 we can sit down and work out our entrepreneurial ideas – can we become risk takers to build the Kingdom?

Amen