

A different economy

I was told as a child that the definition of a parable was ‘an earthly story with a heavenly meaning’ - in other words a story about mundane, everyday things that had the power to disclose something about the ways of God. Well, would that it were so simple! In fact Jesus’ parables are often complex and multi-layered and they have the capacity to throw us and to leave us troubled and perplexed. At times I think they are stories that, rather than telling us simple truths about our faith, actually provoke us to disagree and to fight back. Today’s parable from Matthew’s gospel is a perfect example.

At one level it can be read simply enough. So it has been suggested, entirely plausibly, that the story has to be understood in the context of Jesus’ ongoing controversy with the religious establishment of his day. On this reading they are the ones who have been entrusted with great riches by God. They have been given God’s Law and all the privileges of being Israel, but instead of sharing them with the world and being a blessing to the nations they have hoarded God’s riches, just like the third servant in the story. And inevitably they will suffer the consequences, as they did in AD70 when their prized city of Jerusalem fell to the Romans and they were indeed thrown into the outer darkness and there was weeping and gnashing of teeth. And that is doubtless one layer of meaning to the story that would have had purchase at the time – though it may have less to say to us here and now.

So there is a second, much more common interpretation which can be applied more directly to us and on this reading the story is a challenge to us to use the gifts and talents that God has given us. On this account Jesus has departed and we await his return and while we do so we are to be active and engaged, using the resources that God has given us. Every one of us has God-given abilities and we are responsible to God for the way we use what has been entrusted to us, and one day we will be called to give account. And no doubt there is truth in this and it is another legitimate layer of meaning to the parable. The problem with that interpretation however is that it skates over some of the rather troubling features of the story which I think we need to address.

So, at one level it is unfortunate, surely, that the story uses the image of talents, which in Jesus’ day referred not to abilities and gifts but to substantial sums of money. And we are talking big here. One talent was worth about 20

years wages so these are serious sums that this wealthy speculator is throwing around. The servant given five talents could be looking at somewhere around five million euros. And of course on this basis the story could be used – and doubtless has been used - to encourage wise and prudent investment and to extol the virtues of capitalism. Just look at how money can generate money! And that fits with the thesis of the sociologist Max Weber who famously argued that there is a clear link between the Protestant faith and the rise of capitalism. But you do have to wonder why on earth Jesus, knowing that he will soon be arrested and tried and executed and with his eyes set firmly on the cross, should decide at this moment to engage in a discourse on the benefits of capitalism. And this is especially true when so much of Jesus' preaching so clearly targeted the destructive effects of money and wealth – what he called 'Mammon'. Indeed earlier in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says, 'No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. ... You cannot serve God and mammon.' So here is the problem. Is Jesus here in this parable endorsing mammon? Is he giving a positive account of it? Is he telling us that this is how we are to live? Is Jesus commending this fantastically wealthy master in the story when elsewhere he warned that it was more difficult for a rich man to enter his Kingdom than for a camel to pass through a needle's eye? It's interesting that in our reading from the prophet Zephaniah this morning God threatens Jerusalem with destruction in his day, and it's all down to mammon. Zephaniah warns the rich of Jerusalem that their wealth will be plundered, their houses laid to ruin and 'neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them.' They have submitted to mammon and now it will not save them. Strange, then, to find Jesus of all people endorsing money-making when he is threatening Jerusalem with destruction in his day.

Then there are other troubling features of this parable. Listen again to the third servant's description of his master: 'I knew you to be a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed...' Is that not a description of the very worst kind of imperial plundering of other nations' resources? Does not reaping without sowing describe the worst excesses of empires, be they British or American or Spanish or Portuguese or – dare I say it? – even Dutch? Do we not have here in his master a description of the very worst kind of ruthless capitalist, and is that supposed to be a picture of Jesus? Indeed I think you could argue that the third servant

who buried his talent is the hero of the piece. I mean, do you ever worry about ethical investment? Do you ever worry that your savings or your shares might be propping up corrupt practices by oil companies or that they might be supporting arms manufacturers that are selling to brutal regimes with bad human rights records? Do you ever worry where your money is going? And, given his master's perverse reputation, maybe we can understand the third servant wanting just to hide his money under his mattress where at least it can do no harm. And there's another disturbing feature of this story. Notice that no-one is acting generously. No-one is giving anything away. Yes, the master gives huge sums of money to his servants and they benefit but only because the company benefits, and the master will ensure that he benefits most of all. There is no real generosity in this story. Not even the third servant thinks to give his talent away so that someone in need might have received.

But then, perhaps most troubling of all, there is this quite extraordinary statement that I can hardly believe comes from the lips of Jesus. Listen again: 'For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.' What?! Is this the God of all the earth doing justly and rightly? Is this God's way for the world – that the poor and the deprived get what little they have taken away while the rich and the privileged have more and more pressed into their already stuffed fists? Is this the gospel? Did Jesus get crucified for going in amongst the poor to tell them that it was bad news but it was foreclosure time!

No, I want to suggest another reading of this parable. I want to suggest that Jesus here is not telling us how things ought to be - how we should live. What he is doing is describing the very worst excesses of mammon. This is how the system at its worst works – the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and anyone who goes against the system, anyone who refuses to play the game, any whistle-blowers are ruthlessly dealt with and thrown into outer darkness. And indeed from that point of view the third servant comes closest to Christ who did go against the stream and who did defy the system and who did end up cast into the outer darkness.

So on this reading what can we take positively from this story? What edification can we derive from a description of the economy of mammon at its most ruthless? Well I would suggest that the value of this truly disturbing parable is that by way of contrast it reveals to us something of a very different

economy, what we might call the economy of grace. On this reading Jesus is inviting us to consider that alongside mammon there is another power at work in the world, one far greater than mammon and with far greater capacity to change and to bring blessing. This economy is presided over not by a tyrant who gleans where he did not harvest but one who gives generously and undeservedly. This economy is presided over by the Giver, the open-handed and gracious giver who is revealed in the one who did not grasp at more but who gave up his life for the world. And in this economy those who have and who have been blessed with abundance are going to have to learn to give way to the have-nots, to those who have been dealt a loser's hand. In this economy of God's kingdom everything is going to be turned upside down an inside out, and that's tough for the haves but it sure is good news for the have-nots. And while in the economy of mammon money has the power to generate more money, how much more generative and fertile and infectious is grace, with it's power to transform? There is a writer called Ann Morisy who is a community theologian and who has a lovely turn of phrase. She talks about 'cascades of grace', referring to the way in which simple gracious and graceful acts have a generative power, a kind of momentum that can spread blessing and wellbeing. She writes, 'when people, motivated by venturesome love, embrace a struggle for the wellbeing of others, it can prompt a very graceful, and often unanticipated dynamic, a *cascade of grace*.' This is the crazy, generative economy of the Kingdom.

So, to go back to the beginning. We can read his parable as Jesus' warning to the Jewish religious establishment of his day, who were burying their God-given treasure. And if that has little resonance for us today then yes, we can read the parable as a challenge to us to use our gifts and talents responsibly. But this morning let's adopt this different approach. Let's push back against this story. Let's challenge it. Let's read it not as an account of how we should live but as a contrast to everything that we believe about God and God's realm. The economy of mammon calculates and estimates and harnesses efficiency and productivity, and ensures that the fittest and the most ruthless get the lion's share. But the grace economy of the kingdom stands in contrast to that in all its reckless excess. There generosity and giving abound in the joy of the unconditional and the undeserved. And that's where we are called to live.

Can we help one another live that way? Can we begin here in the church? If only we could then we might have a hope of hearing our master say to us, 'well done, good and trustworthy servant.' Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
we praise and worship you –
you, the giver;
you, the giver of life;
you the giver of love;
you the giver of blessing.
In the beginning you breathed creation
and gave life,
and in the fullness of time you gave us yourself
in Jesus of Nazareth.
And you have given us this world
in all its richness,
and you have given us abilities and opportunities
to make this world a place fit for you to dwell in.

O God, forgive us that we squander so much.
Forgive us that we misuse the things you have given us,
creating injustice and inequality.
And while we marvel at amazing feats performed in outer space
still people down here on earth go hungry
and die from preventable disease.
O God we confess to you our sin and our folly,
And we pray for forgiveness,
and we rejoice in your patience with us
and pray that all the gifts you have given us will
be used in your service and for your glory.
And we pray in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

O loving God,
we praise you today for all those who are gifted with creativity,
and we pray for artists and musicians and actors,
for writers and for poets and comedians
and all who use their talents to inspire and to
elevate the human spirit.
Grant that those so endowed may cultivate their gifts
and use them well.

And we pray for those gifted with insight and understanding,
for scientists and for teachers
and for all who use their talents to explore the wonders of creation
and to open wide the understanding of others.

Grant that those so endowed may cultivate their gifts
and use them well.

And we pray for those gifted with care and compassion,
for doctors and surgeons and nurses and social workers
and all who use their talents to heal and improve
the quality of human life shape the world,
and so with these we pray too for politicians and rulers.
Grant that those so endowed may cultivate their gifts
and use them well.

And in a moment of quiet we reflect on the gifts you have given us
and the responsibilities for which you have resourced us,
and we pray that we may use these gifts well...

And God we pray for a world where
people are not in service to harsh bosses who
place profit above human wellbeing;
a world where the poor do not have what little they have
taken from them by those who already have much;
a world where the economy of mammon is inverted and subverted
but the economy of your Kingdom.
We pray on Jesus' name. Amen.