

Entrusted

For the second week running we are considering one of the strange stories that Jesus told that we call parables – stories that are rarely straightforward but which contain some sort of twist, some unexpected turn which surprises or disorients us. Last week it was a story about a group of bridesmaids waiting for a bridegroom to show up; this week it's about a man who goes away on a journey, who first entrusts his servants with money – and what the servants did with that money. And we heard about one servant who was given 5 talents – talents being a form of currency - and who was quite an entrepreneur for with his five talents he made five more. And we heard of one ser who was given two talents and made two more, and both of those servants are commended by their master on his return from his journey: 'well done, good and trustworthy servant!', and both are entrusted with further responsibility. A third servant, however, simply buries his one talent it in the ground. He considered his master to be a harsh man, a crook, reaping where he did not sew and gathering where he had not scattered seed - and so he did nothing. And, we are told, he is punished by his master, cast out into the darkness where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

So what is it all about? Well, the usual interpretation runs something like this... Jesus knows that he will soon be leaving his disciples. The setting of the story is what we call Holy Week, which began with Jesus entering Jerusalem to the acclaim of his followers but which ended with his crucifixion and resurrection. And Jesus knows that beyond all that he will no longer be physically present to the world – but one day he would return. There is, however, going to be a long delay, during which his followers are going to have to be faithful. They are going to have to be responsible servants and use whatever gifts God gives us in working for his kingdom. And when he does return – well, from the evidence of this parable, those who have not served him with the talents and resources that they have been given are going to be in big trouble. They will be thrown into the outer darkness where, we are told, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth – in other words, hell.

Well, suffice to say that I follow a different interpretation. On this standard reading Jesus is looking into the future, to the time beyond his ministry here and to his return. It seems to me, however, far more plausible to see Jesus here focusing mainly not on the centuries to come, but rather the previous centuries that preceded his coming. Let me explain by recalling the story of Israel, and as we do so we will catch the resonances between Israel's story and this story which Jesus told.

You see, we could trace the story of Israel back centuries before Jesus, when God had called a people out of slavery in Egypt, and he had made an agreement with them that they would be his representatives on earth: he would be their God and they would be his people, and their task would be to bear witness to God's rule and to what life with God can look like. In other words, Israel was entrusted with responsibility. And along with responsibility God entrusted them with gifts which would resource them in their special calling: he gave them God's Law, he gave them a temple, he gave them his very presence as he came to dwell in their midst. These gifts, however, were not to be hoarded. They were given to Israel, but they were for the world, that the world might know the truth about God and life and the universe. And as these gifts were used well and faithfully Israel would be blessed and would flourish. All too often, however, Israel had squandered them. They had hoarded these gifts. Instead of being light for the world they had kept the light for themselves. And now God was doing something new with his ancient people: he was coming to them in Jesus after a long delay to reassert his rule and to summon them back to their true vocation. But the scribes and Pharisees and the religious establishment of Jesus' day were stuck in the old, bad ways. They were resisting Jesus. They were opposing him, and they would soon crucify him. They were following a very dangerous path which would lead them right away from their true vocation. It would lead them eventually to rise up in rebellion against their Roman overlords and the result would be the destruction of Jerusalem, with darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth – which is exactly what happened about 40 years later in 70 AD. So this story is about Jewish history, not Christian history,

and the weeping and gnashing of teeth is not some future hell to which unfaithful servants would be cast: it was the very real events that would follow – and did follow – Jesus’ rejection.

Well, having clarified, I hope, what this story is about, I want to focus in on one particular word that recurs in it, the word translated in our version of the Bible as ‘entrusted’. We read in verse 14 about this man who, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and ‘entrusted’ his property to them. And I think this is a very rich word: it conveys trust, and respect – and risk. So when you entrust someone with a task or with something that is yours you are trusting them – trusting them to be responsible and careful. And that means that you are also respecting them. You do not put trust in people who you do not value. But, of course, you also know that you are taking a risk: what if this person fails you? What if they let you down? What do you stand to lose? And surely one of the saddest, most searing things to have to say to someone, or to have said to you, is, ‘but I trusted you.’ I recall once borrowing my dad’s car and I was with a crowd and just for a laugh we decided to see how many people we could get into it. We managed seventeen, and it was a small car, and then I tried to drive it and I burnt out the clutch and had to crawl home in first gear. And I remember having to face my dad and I remember that unspoken, ‘but I trusted you with the car...’ And in some ways that is the tragedy of the story of Israel that we have just briefly considered: God trusted them, God respected them, God took a risk.

So to return for a moment, to that story of God’s calling of Israel. God calls Israel to be a light to the world, a people through whom God would be revealed to the world and the world drawn to God. And that’s is a massive act of trust by God for they are being called to great responsibility. And in so doing God is valuing and respecting Israel. He is saying I will not accomplish my plans without you. I love and value you enough to be my co-workers, my partners. I’ll be your God and you’ll be my people, and together we will bring salvation to the world - and I will entrust you with all the resources you will need for the task. God is honouring them. God is valuing them, elevating them to the status of God’s co-workers. And in the story they may be mere servant, but such valued servants!

But of course in trusting Israel this way God is taking an enormous risk. God makes himself vulnerable. If Israel fails him, it is his name, his reputation that is on the line. And as the Roman legions crush Jerusalem and ransack the temple and set it ablaze, and as they mock and blaspheme God’s name, I imagine God sighing in sorrow, ‘but I trusted you with all this...’ The story of Israel is the story of a God who risks everything because he loves us, a far cry from the third servants description of his master: a harsh man who reaps where he did not sow and who gathers where he did not scatter.

What we find therefore, in this story, are two distinctive features of our God, the God of Jesus Christ which make him unlike any other god. Firstly, this is God takes risks and suffers as a consequence. This is no typical God – all power and majesty and might. This is a God who makes himself vulnerable by reaching out to us in trust, and who ends up on a cross as a result. But secondly, this God ennoble us by entrusting us with responsibility for this world. He values and honours us by ceding responsibility to us, honouring us as his co-workers. We make a great deal about trusting God, about putting our trust in God – but God also puts his trust in us. And this flies in the face of many criticisms of religion. Critics of religious faith complain that it treats us as infants, that it takes away human responsibility, that it demeans us. On the contrary – Christian faith enhances human responsibility. It honours the work of the scientist and the doctor, the politician and the carer – for in these ways we collaborate with God in tending the world. But equally, just as God did not deliver Israel from its folly by protecting Jerusalem in AD 70 and keeping it safe, so we cannot expect God to protect us from our folly in the way we treat the world, and the environment, and all that God has entrusted us with. We are not absolved of responsibility.

Well, I guess this passage leaves us with one last question, for we need to apply it personally. What has God entrusted you with? For example, what fellow human beings has God entrusted you with, giving you responsibility for their care and wellbeing? Or what resources and riches, gifts and talents have you received in trust? Or what tasks has God delegated you with and said, be faithful in this? What blessings has God endowed you with, saying, ‘care for these, look

after them wisely and let them flourish!’ We are accountable for what we have been entrusted with. Let us pray that when we stand as the servants stood before the master, his word to us will be, ‘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 s 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.