

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20; Ps 128 (127); 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6; Matthew 25:14-30

The Parable of the Talents

Matt 25:14 “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. 19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ 21 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ 23 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 26 But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?’ 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29 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. 30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The inspiration for this scary parable is from Mark’s Little Apocalypse:

It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. (Mark 13:34)

There is also a version in Luke, with a different atmosphere and an even more alarming conclusion, very striking in this gentle Gospel. Cf Luke 19:24-27.

He said to the bystanders, ‘Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds.’ (And they said to him, ‘Lord, he has ten pounds!’) ‘I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.’ (Luke 19:24-27)

How much was a talent? In the Old Testament, a talent was a measure of weight approximating 75 pounds weight / 34 kilos. In the New Testament, a talent was a monetary unit roughly equal to 6,000 drachmas, greater than sixteen years’ wages for a labourer. In other words, even one talent was *mucho!*



THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

What does God desire of us? This simple question is perhaps not asked frequently enough! It can be made quite personal: what does God want of me, from me? In the end, the answer has to be—in the words of the song—“all that I am,” precisely because God loves all that I am. This will mean allowing ourselves to be loved. It will also mean responding with my whole self, including all the gifts of body, mind and soul that God has bestowed upon me. In the end, God does hope that we may be and become our true selves. Nothing less is adequate to God’s own love for us.

PRAYER

We are truly grateful to you, God our creator and redeemer, for your many gifts. We ask your help that we may use all you have given us for your glory and for the good of our neighbour. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

KIND OF WRITING

In Matthew 24:3–26:1a we have the last discourse of the Gospel. Its end is signalled by the typical refrain in 26:1a (“when Jesus had finished *all* these sayings”).

In his careful study of the Parable, JP Meier concludes that only four may be traced back with certainty to the historical Jesus. The four include this parable because the very different version in Luke permits multiple attestation. As with last week, is good to bear in mind that a single parable will never give us all we need to keep in mind, but only one or two aspects. Thus certain questions such as the harshness of the boss are, perhaps, not relevant, because the bottom line here is we are each responsible for our response to grace.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In the Wisdom books of the Bible, making use of your abilities is stressed, as we can see from today’s first reading. It may well be that the “woman” in question stands for Lady Wisdom who “comple-

ments” each human being.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) This parable is found in a parable section in Matthew which deals with the end of time. The context is a complex of themes, so the setting matters in Matthew (see also last week’s chart).

(ii) Given the great differences between the version in Matthew and Luke, it is better to think of the parable surviving in M and L rather than in the Q sayings source. This has the added advantage of multiple attestation, allowing us to attribute the parable to the historical Jesus. Matthew reads the story as an allegory of the Second Coming, providing a reflection on the nature of Christian waiting until the Lord comes again.

Luke 19:12 *A certain person, on taking a trip, 13 called ten of his slaves and gave them ten minas and said to them: Do business until I come. 15 After a long time the master of those slaves comes and settles accounts with them. 16 And the first came saying: Master, your mina has produced ten more minas. 17 And he said to him: Well done, good slave, you have been faithful over a pittance, I will set you over much. 18 And the second came saying: Master, your mina has earned five minas. 19 He said to him: Well done, good slave, you have been faithful over a pittance, I will set you over much. 20 And the other came saying: Master, 21 I knew you, that you are a hard person, reaping where you did not sow and gathering up from where you did not winnow; and, scared, I went and hid your mina in the ground. Here, you have what belongs to you. 22 He said to him; Wicked slave! You knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather up from where I have not winnowed? 23 Then you had to invest my money with the money changers! And at my coming I would have received what belongs to me plus interest. 24 So take from him the mina and give it to the one who has the ten minas. 26 For to everyone who has will be given; but from the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.*

ST PAUL

And do this because we know the time, that it is already the hour for us to awake from sleep, for our salvation is now nearer than when we became believers. The night has advanced toward dawn; the day is near. So then we must lay aside the works of darkness, and put on the weapons of light. (Romans 13:11–12)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 14 Temporary absence of the landowner was not untypical. Likewise entrusting your property to your servants

was usual. Servants/slaves in this society could range from abject servitude to positions of real responsibility and authority.

- a) The fig tree as a parable of the coming of the Son of Man
- b) As in the days of Noah
- c) As when a burglar comes
- d) As with a faithful servant when his master returns
- e) As with bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom
- f) *As with talents given to servants to work with*
- g) As with sheep and goats separated by the shepherd

Verse 15 A talent

is an unusually large sum of money—as we saw above. It was never minted as a coin. The man is shrewd and he distributes his gifts according to the perceived ability of his servants. His assessments turn out to be accurate.

Verses 16-17 The first principle of business was to increase the wealth of the master. Such trading involves risk taking (not unlike the faith project itself).

Verse 18 This person takes no risks. In antiquity, burial was considered the safest way to protect your money, as can be seen from the finds of such treasure which turn up from time to time.

Verse 19 The long delay has an allegorical meaning, pointing to the delayed second coming of Christ.

Verses 20-23 Good and faithful are not simply complimentary; they mean rather that the servants have engaged fully and creatively in the (gospel) project. Cf. *Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”* (Matthew 19:28) Entering in to the end time joy of the master—an addition—suggests paradise in Matthew’s reading.

Verses 24-25 Even though the master is not defrauded, the time has been wasted and the trust placed in the servant has been fruitless.

Verses 26-27 Unreserved condemnation for failure to take even the minimal, obvious, even easy initiative.

Verse 28 Judgement is immediate and disturbingly unjust, at least in our eyes.

Verse 29 A paradoxical teaching at the service of the main message. This concluding saying just might be secondary to the original parable, because it is found elsewhere. Cf. the earlier: *For to 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.* (Matthew 13:12)

Verse 30 “Outer darkness” and “grinding of teeth” are typical expressions of

Matthew, so we hear his voice very much in the conclusion. Vivid punishment is an invitation to change *now*.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. A gift given in love, is given to be enjoyed, treasured, and used. Through fear, one servant failed to recognise the loving trust being shown to him and buried the talent. When have you found that overcoming fear helped you to make the most of opportunities in life?

2. On the level of our own personal life, faith is not given to us to be locked away, but to be “traded” with. We trade with it when we believe in its value, trust it, and use it, bringing it into the experiences we have in daily life. Can you recall times when relying on your faith has brought you rewards?

3. Likewise with our own personal gifts and talents. We can fall into the trap of seeing these as our personal possession so that we can do with them as we like, rather than share them as gifts so that they can be multiplied. What is your experience of hoarding or sharing your own gifts? When did you feel most alive?

4. Pope Francis in his letter *The Joy of the Gospel* wrote, “I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelisation in their respective communities. ... The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters.” EG (33) How is your parish responding to this call?

PRAYER

God, from whose own abundance, all gifts and skills are lavishly bestowed, encourage us to use our talents as generously as you have allotted them, so that, being faithful to your purpose, we may become sharers in your glory.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

So then we must not sleep as the rest, but must stay alert and sober

1 Thess 5:1 Now on the topic of times and seasons, brothers and sisters, you have no need for anything to be written to you. 2 For you know quite well that the day of the Lord will come in the same way as a thief in the night. 3 Now when they are saying, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction comes on them, like labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will surely not escape. 4 But you, brothers and sisters, are not in the darkness for the day to overtake you like a thief would. 5 For you all are sons of the light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of the darkness. 6 So then we must not sleep as the rest, but must stay alert and sober. 7 *For those who sleep, sleep at night and those who get drunk are drunk at night.* 8 *But since we are of the day, we must stay sober by putting on the breastplate of faith and love and as a helmet our hope for salvation.* 9 *For God did not destine us for wrath but for gaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.* 10 *He died for us so that whether we are alert or asleep we will come to life together with him.* 11 *Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, just as you are in fact doing.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is our final reading from 1 Thessalonians and, given the time of year, it takes us appropriately to the end of time.

KIND OF WRITING

(i) Paul was a Pharisaic Jew, as was Jesus himself, with an apocalyptic worldview. He understood his encounter with Christ in terms of apocalyptic (see Gal 1:15-17) and after that encounter he remained a Christ-believing apocalyptic Jew. The resurrection of Jesus was, for him, an apocalyptic event and in the same way the end of time, the fulfilment of the resurrection, will be an apocalyptic event as well.

(ii) This paragraph (as does 4:13-18) falls into a simple rhetorical format.

- v. 1 Introduction or *exordium*
- v. 2 Thesis or *propositio*
- vv. 3-10 Proofs or *probationes*
- v. 18 Conclusion or *peroratio*

RELATED READINGS

Jesus said, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” (Mark 13:32–37)

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The believers in Thessalonica asked Paul two questions about the end. The first involved the status those already dead at the time of the Parousia. The second follows on it: when will that be? It is a good question—already answered by Jesus in the words, “*But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*” (Mark 13:32) If Jesus himself did not know...

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The new topic is introduced. “You have no need” is Paul’s equivalent of “needless to mention” and then people go on and mention.

Verse 2 The metaphor goes back to Jesus himself: “But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.” (Luke 12:39 = Mt 24:43) It is twice personalised in the book of Revelation: “*See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame.*” (Rev 16:15; cf. 3:3). The first key metaphor is therefore domestic. It teaches that the coming is *unpredictable*.

Verse 3 The second step combines politics with childbirth. Augustus really did bring peace and an end to war. The Julio-Claudian dynasty (*Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero*) used this as propaganda for their government. In typical imperial fashion, they reassured so as to quell opposition. Paul says even the apparent security of the state is not for ever. It too will come to an unpredictable end. Paul switches metaphors and talks of labour pains. This was a traditional image to capture the struggle of the end times in a framework of

hope. Just as labour lead to a birth, the struggle of the end will lead to the new creation. Labour is Paul’s second metaphor, this time suggesting *inevitability*. It naturally gives raise to a question: if the end of both unpredictable and inevitable, what should we do now? Paul gives a varied reply.

Verses 4-5 Thieves come a night, but the believers live in the daylight of Christ. This is no time for sleep but for watchfulness.

Verses 6-7 A further contrast is set up between two kinds of behaviour: drunkenness and sleep v. sobriety and wakefulness.

Verse 8 Only now does Paul directly answer the question what must we do? Given the unpredictability and inevitability of the end, believers need armour, specifically a breastplate and a helmet. We’ve moved from theft through childbirth to the army! Specifically, we need to faith, love and hope, in that order. This order was already anticipated in v. 3: *your work of faith and labour of love and endurance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Thess 1:3) It matches the sequence of the letter itself: *faith* (2:1-3:13) *love* (4:1-12) and *hope* (4:13-5:11).

Verse 9 Wrath here means the upheaval of the end rather than (God’s) anger.

Verse 10 Paul looks back over both 4:13-18 and 5:1-11.

Verse 11 This expands slightly the similar conclusion in 4:13. It is typical of Paul to affirm their goodness (the “indicative”) while encouraging further and deeper engagement (the “imperative”).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Time—essential, fleeting, deeply human—is a mysterious business. Have you framed your own attitude to time and its use?

2. It is possible to sleep walk through life—favoured a bit by the culture of distraction. Have you had your “wake up” call?

3. Paul names again his favourite trait of faith, love and hope. Reflect on your experience of each using 1 Cor 13.

PRAYER

Saving God, you have destined us for salvation in your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to embrace fully the grace of salvation and enjoy life in abundance. Amen.

Dame Wisdom at work

Prov 31:10 A capable wife who can find?
 She is far more precious than jewels.
 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her,
 and he will have no lack of gain.
 12 She does him good, and not harm,
 all the days of her life.
 13 She seeks wool and flax,
 and works with willing hands.
 14 *She is like the ships of the merchant,
 she brings her food from far away.*
 15 *She rises while it is still night
 and provides food for her household
 and tasks for her servant girls.*
 16 *She considers a field and buys it;
 with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.*
 17 *She girds herself with strength,
 and makes her arms strong*
 18 *She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
 Her lamp does not go out at night.*
 19 She puts her hands to the distaff,
 and her hands hold the spindle.
 20 She opens her hand to the poor,
 and reaches out her hands to the needy.
 21 *She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
 for all her household are clothed in crimson.*
 22 *She makes herself coverings;
 her clothing is fine linen and purple.*
 23 *Her husband is known in the city gates,
 taking his seat among the elders of the land.*
 24 *She makes linen garments and sells them;
 she supplies the merchant with sashes.*
 25 *Strength and dignity are her clothing,
 and she laughs at the time to come.*
 26 *She opens her mouth with wisdom,
 and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*
 27 *She looks well to the ways of her household,
 and does not eat the bread of idleness.*
 28 *Her children rise up and call her happy;
 her husband too, and he praises her:*
 29 *“Many women have done excellently,
 but you surpass them all.”*
 30 Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
 but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
 31 Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
 and let her works praise her in the city gates.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This remarkable poem brings the book of Proverbs to a resounding conclusion, echoing chapters 1-9. No doubt the reading will evoke differing reactions, but for its time and place, it was forward looking.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a poem, which takes us through the outstanding features of this very capable woman. She is active in several areas of business; she never rests, not even at home; and all along she is not only well-dressed but in herself wise when she speaks. The parallelism of

Hebrew poetry is present, but not in any slavish way.

Technically, this is an acrostic poem, that is each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. For an attempt replicate an acrostic layout in translation, see Psalm 25 in the New Jerusalem Bible.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Proverbs, as it now stands, is a collection of collections, reflecting different periods and different social contexts, including the wider Middle East. Our poem has the feeling of tractate “academic” wisdom, unlike the

pithy expressions of popular wisdom.

RELATED READINGS

Key texts: Job 28; Proverbs 1, 8 and 9; Baruch 3:9-4:4; Sirach 24; Wisdom 7:7-9:18.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 10 The question is ambiguous. Is she impossible or merely difficult to find? Neither, according to Proverbs! It is by the grace of God. The contrast with precious stones is a commonplace (see Job 28, for example).

Verses 11-12 The husband does get a look-in but always as a beneficiary. He has a walk-on part at the end to praise this marvellous woman.

Verse 13 She is not only a business woman but a worker in her own right. The mention of wool and flax serve to anticipate how she looks after her household.

Verses 19-20 The two verses belong together, not only because of the word “hands” throughout, but also because the layout is chiasmic, that is ABB*A*. Successful home industry creates disposable income, allowing for generosity to the poor.

Verse 30 In biblical idiom, the contrast is not so much *either/or* but *both/and* with a real emphasis on qualities over appearances. This verse provides a didactic observation, in case we should miss it.

Verse 31 This is a further comment from an observer. It takes up setting of the gates from v. 29 and reminds us the public esteem for this woman.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Who are the people of energy and experience whom I admire?

2. There is indeed a hunger in the heart for wisdom, for that sense of direction from God, which we all need if we wish to use our talents well.

3. Success brings other responsibilities, such as taking care of the less fortunate.

PRAYER

Serene Light, shining in the ground of my being, draw me to Yourself! Draw me past the snares of the senses, out of the mazes of the mind, Free me from symbols, from words, that I may discover the Signified, the Word Unspoken, in the darkness that veils the ground of my being. (A prayer by F.C. Happold)

THE LITURGY

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20; Ps 128 (127); 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6; Mt Matthew 25:14-30

READING 1 AND 3

There is no question but this woman is using her talents. The list of her activities is both exhaustive and exhausting!

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 128 (127) takes up the picture of family life implied in the reading from Proverbs but it generalises the teaching: O blessed are those who fear the Lord.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20

You may find this picture of a woman liberating or irritating! There is no doubt that she is making use of her time and talents.

Second reading

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6

Early Christians did wonder when the end would be. Paul doesn't know *when* but he does know *how* to live in preparation. No sleepwalking through life!

Gospel

Matthew 25:14-20

A talent was a measure of weight and then a coin. Our word "talent" helps us to enter into the parable.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 16 November

St Margaret of Scotland

Apocalypse 1:1-4, 2:1-5

The opening words of this reading promise us happiness—if we listen! The close letter is call to repentance, never too late!

Luke 18:35-43

The blind man is strategically placed on the road out of Jericho, just when pilgrims would be feeling uplifted by the proximity of the Holy City. In expanded form, the prayer of the blind man has entered Christian tradition as the "Jesus prayer": *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

Tuesday 17 November

St Elizabeth of Hungary, religious

Apocalypse 3:1-6, 14-22

The gospel communities in Sardis and Laodicea give the impression being alive...but the reality is otherwise. This wake-up call is for us too.

Luke 19:1-10

This beloved story has universal appeal. It illustrates both the proclamation of the Good News and its reception by conversation of heart. Of course, we all have to climb our own sycamore trees!

Wednesday 18 November

Dedication of the basilicas of Sts Peter and Paul

Apocalypse 4:1-11

A worship scene opens up for us: rich in symbol and mysterious. At the centre we hear words we use at every mass; at the end, we confess God, the creator of all there is.

Luke 19:11-28

Luke's version of this parable —also found in Matthew, with an echo in Mark—is provocative, even disturbing. It does reflect the instability of the making and unmaking of kings is late first century Palestine. At the same time, Luke wants us to read it as part of his teaching about Jesus, both proclaimer of the Kingdom and King. The frame is a severe warning not to flitter away the time of delay because the King will indeed return at an unexpected time.

Thursday 19 November

Apocalypse 5:1-10

The sealed scroll contains the plan of God for the course of history. Who can open it? The lamb—Jesus—can open it, because of his cross and resurrection.

Luke 19:41-44

Our Gospel today—unique to Luke—looks back historically to what actually happened. Jesus looks back not in anger but in compassion. At the same time, the reason for the destruction is given: *all because you did not recognise your opportunity when God offered it.* This final comment brings the text into our present reality. Cf. *See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is*

the day of salvation! (2Corinthians 6:2)

Friday 20 November

Apocalypse 10:8-11

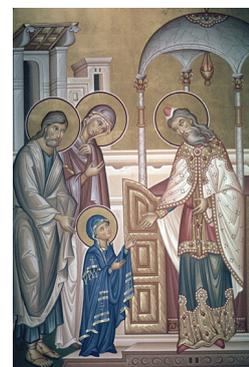
This puzzling scene—an echo of Ezekiel—tell us that the writer had a message both bitter and sweet. Sweet to those on the side of God; bitter to those on "the other side."

Luke 19:45-48

Luke's version of the Temple action is much gentler perhaps reflecting Luke's concern to affirm the Jewish roots of the Christian movement. It is, nevertheless, a judgment and a prophetic call.

Saturday 21 November

Presentation of the BVM



Apocalypse 11:4-12

The Apocalypse does not lack obscurity—at least for us today! Who are the "two witnesses"? The imagery of the olive trees and the lampstands suggests channels through which God's grace becomes effective, offering light. The Old Testament reference is to Zech 4:1-14: Joshua the priest and Zerubbabel the king, here standing for the *priestly* and *royal* roles of Israel. Thus, they symbolise the church, God's new people, both priestly and kingly.

The witnesses—church members—will indeed suffer martyrdom, but they are alive in God and their witness is ever effective.

Luke 20:27-40

Our reading today is certainly mysterious. It echoes stories of Elijah and Elisha. The prophets did and will suffer—but God, in whose hands they are, will raise them up.