

Sermon - a talent for joy

Based on Zephaniah 1.7, 12-18 and Matthew 25.14-30 (NRSV)

A political commentary?

- Political matters have been occupying the attention of a lot of people in recent times - whether it concerns the presidential elections in the United States, or various controversies in Australian federal and state governments, across a range of different topics.
- And there are other countries and incidents that could be cited, about lawmakers, and elections, and policies, and the integrity of leaders - or lack thereof.
- Jesus appeared to say little about these aspects in his own lifetime, being more focused on people's relationship with God, and being openly critical of religious leaders when they put obstacles in the way of that relationship - when they stopped people from knowing and experiencing the love, grace, compassion, and generosity of God.
- Nevertheless, it appears that he did not entirely ignore the bigger political picture, but rather, in acknowledging it, still prioritised people's behaviour in terms of its right-wiseness - it's right alignment with God's desire.

Complacency come-uppance

- The prophet Zephaniah, whose words are heard in our Old Testament reading today, likewise referred to the political situation of God's people in his time - but again, in terms of their relationship with God.
- And Zephaniah describes a 'day of the Lord' - like the reading from the prophet Amos last Sunday - as being a day of reckoning.
- And reckoning, not so much for individuals, but for the body politic as a whole - for all the people who are materially well-off, as a community.
- These are the people who are collectively described as having wealth, houses, vineyards, fortifications, silver and gold.
- Essentially the 'haves' in a society that also had many 'have-nots'.
- And Zephaniah describes the Lord as warning his people:
*I will punish the people
who rest complacently on their dregs,
those who say in their hearts,
'The Lord will not do good,
nor will he do harm.'* (Zeph 1.12)
- This attitude is a bit like saying: God won't do anything to help or harm us - God doesn't really care, or even, perhaps, matter.
- So Zephaniah gives a very clear warning that those who are complacent - about addressing inequality and injustice, that is, *'because they have sinned against the Lord'* (Zeph 1.17) - will suffer unpleasant consequences.

Parable of the talents

- Now this reading has been given as one that complements today's Gospel passage.
- So it's good to bear it in mind as we engage with the parable of the talents.
- Or, as I have suggested, maybe the parable of the non-compliant protester - but we'll see about that.
- Let's start with describing the standard interpretation of this parable.
- A man distributes some of his money to his slaves for them to make some more money.
- Some of them do so, and one doesn't.
- The one who doesn't put the money to any use at all, but merely keeps it secure, is punished by being ejected from the house, without shelter, employment, or sustenance.

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- Actually it's even worse, because he is thrown *'into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'* (Matt 25.30)
- So the simple straightforward teaching of the story is that we should use our God-given abilities productively, and we will be rewarded.
- I've discovered that the English word meaning ability or skill is actually derived from this very parable, where the coin, *talanton* in Greek, was a measure both of weight and value.
- There were 60 shekels to a mina, and 60 minas to a talent.
- Each *talanton* or talent was therefore worth 3,600 shekels.
- It's good to realise that our talents should be valued so highly!

- Now having looked at the usual interpretation, it's good to try to reflect a little more deeply, and try to take some of the more unsettling details into account.
- If we assume that the master of the slaves is our Lord, then how do we account for the untrustworthy slave's description: *"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed"* (Matt 25.27)?
- This doesn't sound at all like the God that Jesus describes to us.

Luke's version - a different story

- And at this point it is tempting to turn to a similar parable that Jesus tells in Luke's account, in chapter 19.
- The slave in that story similarly says: *"Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow."* (Luke 19.20-21)
- But when looking at the rest of that story, it turns out that there are too many differences.
- Luke's story describes the master as someone going off to be made a king, with opponents that don't want that to happen.
- It had ten slaves each given a pound, rather than a number of talents, and when the master returns, having been made king, he slaughters all who had opposed his coronation.
- In the story that Luke relates, it can be more easily seen that the slave that refuses to participate in the cruel master's business of becoming ever richer is perhaps representative of Jesus himself - someone who refuses to participate in systemic processes that make the rich richer and the poor poorer.
- But if we return to Matthew's account of this story, it is important to acknowledge that in spite of some similarities, there are enough differences to show it as having a fundamentally different teaching.
- We always need to be careful about mixing and matching stories from the different Gospel accounts, and never just assume that similar stories have the same meaning.

Context of the talents story

- So, coming back to the context of Matthew's account of Jesus telling this parable, it is relevant to note what other stories Jesus was telling along with this one.
- Jesus was in Jerusalem with his disciples, and they had asked him about the signs that would indicate that he was coming into his kingdom, and when that would be.
- Although they were probably thinking about this in terms of Jesus establishing a worldly kingdom, Jesus nevertheless answers them in terms of establishing the kingdom of heaven.
- And so the story he tells immediately before the parable of the talents is the parable of the bridesmaids, which starts with his usual words: *"the kingdom of heaven will be like this"* (Matt 25.1)

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- And the story he tells immediately afterwards is that of separating the sheep from the goats - the sheep being those who responded to others in need, and who end up in the kingdom, and the goats being those who rejected others in need, and who end up outside the kingdom.
- So it is reasonable to assume, here in Matthew's account, that the parable of the talents is about participating in the kingdom of heaven.

'Enter into the joy'

- The untrustworthy slave's description of the master as being a harsh man can be understood to be an untrustworthy description.
- The master doesn't bother refuting his slave's description - he merely uses that slave's rationale to highlight how out of step the slave was with the master's purpose.
- The statement near the end, that *'those who have will be given more'* suggests that the other slaves have actually understood that the talents given to them were gifts to be used creatively.
- And when they do so, and the benefits increase, on each occasion the master praises them and says *"Enter into the joy of your master."* (Matt 25. 21, 23)
- While this parable does indeed encourage us to put our talents to good use, at a deeper level it says something about the kingdom of heaven.
- Compared to the story in Luke where each slave was given a pound, here Matthew's story has slaves given talents - five, two, and one - where each talent is worth about 75 pounds (depending on the conversion system.)
- The master in this story is a generous one, not like the vengeful one in Luke's story.
- This understanding is a better fit for our generous God, who blesses us generously.
- The untrustworthy slave lives with a false image of God - a God who *'will not do good, nor will he do harm'*, as Zephaniah critically describes the mindset of those he warns.
- This slave, who can only give back to God what he's been given without having used it, ends up missing the kingdom of heaven.
- He doesn't understand that exercising right stewardship over his God-given talents will enable him to enter into that heavenly joy, while not doing so prevents him from being able to enter into the kingdom of heaven.
- Indeed, he finds himself in the outer darkness - that is, outside the kingdom of heaven.
- And the slaves who do respond appropriately to God's generous gifts not only multiply those gifts, but by doing so participate in the kingdom of heaven.
- And so, even though the teaching is still about putting to good use what God has generously provided us with, this story that Jesus tells in Matthew's account goes further.
- In it, Jesus is teaching us that by making the most of what God blesses us with - that by using our talents right-wisely, in line with God's desire for us and for others - not only do these blessings multiply, but moreover, we are able to enter into the joy of our Lord - we are able to participate in the kingdom of heaven, even here, even now.