

Sunday 13 November 2011, 2pm

Reading: Matthew 25:14-30

This reading has been doing my head in all week!

Last Sunday I had a quick read through the lectionary readings, and thought, "Ah, the parable of the talents – that will be fun. I wonder where I'll go with that? Maybe something about the way that our picture of God affects the way we respond to God."

And then on Monday I picked up a couple of books to read a bit more around the parable.

And then my head was done in.

You see, any time I've read this parable or heard it preached on, it's always been fairly clear that it's quite allegorical – each element stands for something else.

So the master is God or Jesus,

and we are the servants who have been given talents and left to get on with the master's work,

and we can use and grow and develop our talents, which is good and approved by God,

or we can bury our talent, refuse to use it, and then we lose even what we had.

Is that more or less what you've heard before?

And I think that's got a lot going for it.

God has given us gifts and abilities, and they are to be used, not squandered, and (pushing a bit beyond the immediate story) used for the growth of the kingdom or for the good of other people or for some other good purpose, so that at the end, when the master returns OR when Jesus returns, God will say to us "Well done you good and faithful servant – enter into the joy of your master"

Except....

What I found myself reading on Monday put a whole new spin on that. It looked at this story from a different lens entirely, put it in a different framework. And the whole story was turned on its head.

You see, when Jesus first told this story, the world was a very different place (perhaps). In Jewish society there had been an understanding that the land belonged to God, and God had given land to each family and tribe, and the land could not be sold off in perpetuity. (The laws surrounding the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25 explained how this would work.)

But the situation into which Jesus was speaking was very different from that egalitarian ideal. The very small (perhaps 1%?) wealthy elite had acquired land, and much of their wealth came from interest on loans and from rents. Peasant farmers often went into debt - the loans were often at exorbitant levels of interest, with land as collateral, and when they could not pay (because they were living close to subsistence anyway) the lenders foreclosed and took their land to settle the debt, reducing the peasants to being tenant farmers or day labourers with no security, living absolutely on the breadline.

The wealthy landowning elite were most often absentee landlords, who organised their affairs through household retainers, trusted servants who were given a lot of responsibility and power.

When Jesus told this story, people assumed that all goods existed in finite limited supply, and had already been distributed. Because the pie was "limited" and already distributed, an increase in the share of one person automatically meant a loss for someone else. Honorable people, therefore, did not try to get more, and those who did were automatically considered to be thieves. Acquisition was, by its very nature, understood as stealing. Profit making and the acquisition of wealth were automatically assumed to be the result of extortion or fraud. Noblemen avoided such accusations of getting rich at the expense of others by having their affairs handled by slaves. Such dishonourable behavior was OK for slaves, since slaves were without honor anyway.

Do you see what this does to the way this parable was first heard? It becomes a very familiar picture of life as it really was – the wealthy absentee landowner, the servants who would only be able to double the money they were given by extortionate practices, probably lending it at exorbitant rates of interest, perhaps accumulating more land as a result of the inability to repay loans, thus reducing another family to poverty.

These two may have been slaves themselves, but they had 'bought into' the system and were playing the game to accumulate wealth, ignoring the consequences for others around them.

And what about the third servant, the one who had received 1 talent? (Remember, a talent was a vast amount of money: 15-20 years wages for an ordinary person.) He had done the honourable thing, what rabbinic law said was the safest and most responsible way of caring for someone else's money – he had buried it in the ground. And he had resisted being part of the exploitative system of accumulation of wealth. In fact, he spoke truth to power, it would seem, when his master returned and called him to account - “I knew you are a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed”. His master condemned him because he didn't even put the money to work earning interest – a practice which was forbidden under the law, in Exodus 22, Deuteronomy 23 and Leviticus 25.

The third slave had in fact subverted his master's intentions, refusing to be part of further exploitation and accumulation. As a result, what he had taken care of is taken from him and given to the slave who had the most – illustrating, Jesus says, the fact that to all who have, more shall be given – and that more has to come from somewhere, so from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

And then the slave is banished, into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. And that surely must have been how many of Jesus' listeners had felt, those who had been forced off their land, abandoned to the highly precarious life of day labourers.

And this is what has been doing my head in this week. Because this way of reading it seems to make the most sense of the story Jesus told in the context in which Jesus told it – but what does it say to us today? Because today, the assumptions our economic system is based on are completely the opposite of the assumptions operating in Jesus' day – we assume that goods are an "unlimited supply", and that growth is good. If we start to run out, we can make more. We prize and reward those who use their capital to make more money for themselves and to create more jobs for others.

What is Jesus' story saying to us? Could it be suggesting that we should be joining the Occupy protesters in the Octagon – or at least listening carefully to what they are saying? What questions does it suggest we could be asking at candidate meetings over the coming fortnight, and how might it inform the decision we make as we come to vote?

Jesus tells this story in the middle of teaching about 'the end times' and the coming of the kingdom of God. The parable of the ten bridesmaids, last week, began “the kingdom of heaven will be like...”

But this parable doesn't begin that way.

Is this perhaps talking more about what it is like in this age, in this world, before the kingdom of heaven arrives?

And what then is the response of those who follow Jesus when living in this sort of world, a world marked by exploitation and massive inequality and the accumulation of so much in the hands of so few at the expense of so many.

What would it take, living in this world, to hear God say to us, “Well, done, good and faithful servant”?

Matthew 25 goes on to more of Jesus' words that we know well - “When the Son of Man comes in his glory ... he will separate the people ... as a shepherd separate the sheep from the goats.”

Judgment will not be on the basis of how much money we have made, nor on how religious we were, but rather on whether we saw that the least of our sisters and brothers in the human family, whether in or out of prison, had food, clothing, and health care. We serve Jesus himself to the extent that we do these things, and we neglect Jesus himself to the extent that we don't.

Listen to another version of today's parable, written by Ross Scott, a NZ minister:

The Parable of the Ruthless Global Entrepreneur and the Country Lad.

There was once a ruthless global entrepreneur known for his 'hostile take overs' and 'asset stripping'.

He called in two junior executives and he said he wanted to be involved in helping to solve the projected world food shortage, and he put them in charge of a portion of his personal wealth.

To the first executive he gave responsibility for \$5 billion. To the second he gave responsibility for \$2

billion. Each according to their ability.

In an attempt to demonstrate that he was acting in an altruistic way he also approached a young country lad who was making a name for himself in humanitarian concerns. To the young country lad he gave responsibility for \$1 billion.

The first executive used his \$5 billion to acquire a large tract of Amazonian jungle. He had it burnt and cleared and planted it in fodder crops, which were used to grow cattle. The carcasses were frozen and shipped, using third world crew on minimal wages, to an Asian destination where the meat was processed and packaged and then shipped to Europe and America where it sold for less than the local farmers could grow the meat. This was achieved while still making a healthy profit.

The second invested in soya seed development through genetic engineering (GE) and then sought legal patents on the resulting seeds. He took them to the third world and planted them. In the first year fantastic yields were achieved compared with the local seeds. The next year genetic testing showed that the few locals who were still growing crops from their own seed had traces of the genetically engineered soya in them. He was able to successfully bring court cases against these farmers. Soon it became impossible to grow anything but the GE seed. With a monopoly, large profits resulted.

The country lad took his money and having no respect for the ways of the ruthless entrepreneur went to the areas of the world where there was poverty. He sat down with the elders of the villages. For one he dug a well. For another, a water race. For another, a storage shed. For another, it was the planting of shelter. For others it was paying debt so that they could grow food rather than commercial crops for the international corporations. To each village he supplied the resource the people needed. Soon the villagers were self sufficient in food and no longer needed food aid, funded by donations, but grown by international corporations. In doing this, he effectively put all the money in the ground of the villages.

Then the entrepreneur came to see how the three had progressed.

The first outlined his programme and handed over a \$5 billion profit. The entrepreneur was impressed and pleased that he now had greater leverage over the beef industry in both the US and Europe. He said, 'Good and faithful servant, you have done well.'

The second outlined his programme which had turned in a \$2 billion profit. The entrepreneur was very happy and was most pleased to see he now had control of soya production for a large part of the world.

Then the country lad came in, fearful but determined, and said directly to the entrepreneur's face that he had no respect for the unethical and ruthless way he did his business and that much of what he had learnt about his dealings could now be found on Wiki leaks.

He then proceeded to inform the entrepreneur that he had buried the \$1 billion into projects directed by villagers for their own people. As a result they were self sufficient, no longer needing the aid of the west.

The entrepreneur was angry at this betrayal. He could also see he had lost advantage over large areas of peasant farmers. He proceeded to find some young men in one of the villages and paid them some silver coins to accuse the country lad of sexual misconduct. Then, pulling strings in the corridors of power, he ensured that the country lad was charged, prosecuted and buried in a third world jail.

He then turned to the other two and commissioned them to undo what the country lad had achieved and retrieve his money.

[Ross Scott Nov 2011]

REFERENCES

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Richard Q Ford *The Parables of Jesus: recovering the art of listening*
Bruce Malina & Richard Rohrbaugh *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*