

## Taking responsibility

St Philip Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost—16 November 2014

*Zephaniah 1.7, 12-18; Psalm 90.1-8,12; 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11; Matthew 25.14-3*

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, Oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

The parable of the talents draws upon events from the real world to create an open-ended situation into which listeners are invited to ponder. The applications or interpretations of this parable are not readily forthcoming and as parables go the language can be rather colourful. Therefore, we are led to reflect and ask what some of those possibilities might have been for the story's first audience, and then for ourselves. Today's parable is set in the realm of a financial currency called 'Talent'. Some scholars calculate that a *talent* was about 15 years' wages for a labourer, indeed a very large sum of money.

Though Jesus lived in a diverse social context, the large proportion of people that followed him was fairly poor. Imagine you are peasant from Jesus' time. Oppressed by a fairly corrupted state and a punitive empire, you survive on meagre sustenance, and you have no theological training. Now you are listening to Jesus who is telling his audience that a master, before leaving on a journey, entrusts his workers each with a different allocation of talents. This master appears to have a special understanding of the different abilities of each of his servants; consequently one servant is given five talents, the other two and another one.

As time goes by two servants invest the money wisely and double the amount of talents; the third simply buries it. When the master returns, he praises the investors by saying that as they were trustworthy 'in a few things', as a result, they will be made responsible for 'many things', and will 'enter into the joy of the master'. As for the third worker, well...not only he loses his allocation of money but also ends in psychological and physical misery. Moreover, the other two workers get loaded with the allocation of the third.

To a peasant, who believes that there is no possibility to improve their economic status; and whose view of the wealthy is that they are hard masters without mercy, and that even honourable individuals seek only what is already theirs, how do you think this parable was received? I leave it up to you. Historically, the church used this parable to reflect on our readiness and ability to administer the gifts that God has conferred upon us. And that is one application for this parable. However, today we are taking another route that will uncover yet other aspects of this parable.

But for a moment's time let us reminisce on our days as children. Most of us, if not all of us at one point or another can recall having said: "That's not fair!" To such an outright statement of personal dissatisfaction, the grownups in our lives may have responded with: "well, *Life* isn't fair." And friends, the reality is that life isn't fair, and yet, there's something in all of us that wants life to be fair at least 'some' of the time.

I have the feeling that when we say life is not fair, what we are really saying is that life is not even. But in reality no wishful thinking or forward planning will ever make life even or fair. This concept of life's unevenness was manifest to me last Friday. While at work, I happened to meet the parents of an Australian young serviceman who lost his life recently in Afghanistan. Posthumously this young soldier was awarded the Victoria Cross, the highest military honour awarded for valour in service. Sadly, he never lived to see it or receive it. His parents held the Victoria Cross in their trembling hands, and yet, those same hands could not hold their beloved

son any longer. In the face of such an unfair loss, even the highest honour awarded cannot fill the void of that one son lost. Life can be terribly uneven.

So in the next few minutes, I would like to concentrate on two questions: (1) how do we process this very real sense that sometimes the portion that is allocated to us in life appears so uneven; and (2) what is the course of action to take in the phase of the unevenness of life?

What I have been saying is material for reflection that Jesus taught 2,000 years ago. The parable of the talents depicts a contrast of thoughts and behaviours ranging from success to abject failure. Jesus was acutely aware of the human tendency to compete, to begrudge, and to justify acts of irresponsibility.

He was cognisant of the kind of laziness that ultimately isolates individuals due to a loss of **self and others'** awareness. In Jesus last block of teaching in Matthew 24 and 25, he emphasises through a string of parables the kingdom of heaven and the necessary readiness for his return. As we heard in our other NT reading, Paul echoes Jesus' advice as he exhorts the Thessalonian Christians to moral vigilance.

I have the feeling that this parable might not just be about the amount of talents allocated to anyone person, but rather about strength of character, about appropriate choices, about taking responsibility and finally about the creative freedom born as a result of these. We see these personal attributes in the case of the first and second workers for their eagerness to action leads to the creativity that multiplies resources. When it comes to the third worker, I must admit he becomes an interesting psychological study.

What happens next is a great illustration of first century whining, which has not changed much in 2,000 years of history. Listen closely, because as the third servant begins to explain why he buried his one talent, in an unsubtle fashion he tries to blame his inaction on the master. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed.' This employee is clearly alleging that his master is tough to work with; he doesn't leave any crumb on the table, and as far as he perceives him, he doesn't take 'no' for an answer.

Intimidated by his perception of the master the servant confesses outright that his inability to make transactions with one talent is due to his master's intemperance. Furthermore, his inaction turns into emotional paralysis when he admits: 'So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. "See, here is what belongs to you."' Keep in mind that the third worker had as much freedom and choice as the other workers. It seems to me that everything boiled down to character and choices.

This is an example of what happens when we are prone to inaction with the portion assigned to us in life — nothing happens. Moreover, if we are not careful we look around to shift the burden of responsibility onto others. When this kind of behaviour becomes the norm, it pokes holes in our character rendering us as practitioners of narcissism. And there is more, the realization of personal failure finally leads us to an obscure place where depression and isolation become the daily allocation. When this happens, other people have to take the burden of responsibility that was supposed to be ours. Narcissism is endemic in our society and sadly the church is not exempted from it. In the world this behaviour is reflected in the economic and social disenfranchisement of many. In the church, it is manifested in our paralysis to become an effective agent for God. What truly should unite us in hope and action, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ seems to be eclipsed by a large dose of doctrinal tribalism and pride, whose intent is to divide and marginalise.

**So here comes our first point: how do we process this very real sense that sometimes the portion that is allocated to us in life appears so uneven?**

Now if we think as children do, this parable does not seem even, let alone fair. And while it seems unfair that the workers did not get the same sum of money, might it not be fair that someone who owns such immense wealth can decide how to **distribute it**? The lesson at this point is that God is the only one who can do an accurate assessment of yours and my capabilities and thus distribute personal resources according to her infinite wisdom. We are subjected as Jesus was to the unevenness and unfairness of life. God is not trying to be even and God does not compete, what we are given is what we can work with. God makes choices and then we do too. Our choices are the keys that open the incommensurable resources hidden in the shape of one talent, two or five.

So how does this work? You and I have been given a life, what do we do with it? We have been given a family and tasks to carry on for them, what do we do about these responsibilities? We have been given material resources of all kinds great and small, and this includes the environment, what do we do with them? How do we perceive God, the giver of all we are and have? Do we trust God's measure of resource allocation to us, whatever it is? We must become watchful about this, because the misperception and misrepresentation of God restricts our ability to create and leverage our resources for the sake of something bigger than ourselves.

**And this takes us to our second point for consideration: what is the course of action to take in the phase of the unevenness of life?**

We all have some time in life, but we have uneven amounts of time. We all have opportunities, but we have uneven and sometimes what truly appear like unfair amounts of opportunity. To be a person who says, 'I am taking responsibility for this one talent, my life' means: 'I take responsibility for the opportunities and the people that come my way, no matter if they are one, two or five. I am not going to take them for granted, and I am not going to make excuses, and I am not going to compare myself to the people around me'. The bottom line is this: to whom something is given, no matter how great, or small, even or uneven, something is required. It is when we embrace this reality and begin to see it through the lens of a God who loves creation as a whole that we begin to be serious about taking full responsibility for our allocation.

Can we see now the relevance of today's text, difficult and uneven as it seems; it is a beacon of light set up as a warning for our faith pilgrimage. It alerts us to be responsible with each and every portion that has been placed in our care, until that day ... when we shall meet in the joy of our Divine Master. Amen.