



16th November 2020
2nd Sunday Before Advent
1 Thessalonians 5.1-11 |
Matthew 25.14-30
'I'm buying your life back for you.'
St James's Piccadilly
The Revd Dr Ivan Khovacs

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This the 2nd Sunday before Advent. Advent doesn't begin until 29th November, two Sundays from now. But I can't help feel as we make our way through this second lockdown that—if death, judgement, heaven and hell are the themes of Advent—then surely Advent is advertising way too early this year; it's coming on with unrelenting fury, even by the standards of 2020.

It is just as well, then, that our reading from 1st Thessalonians reminds us today that “you are all children of light and children of the day.” The holy darkness and austerity of Advent has its season and its place. “But you are all children of the light.” So let's not give into feelings of dejection; let's stay away from 'keep-you-awake-at-night' despair.

The world is collectively holding its breath at the advent of a vaccine. And I hope you agree with me that all the Nobel prizes in physics, medicine, chemistry—and why not also literature and peace—will be rightly deserved. Because the earth-shattering promise of this medical miracle is in exact and inverse proportion to the apocalypse of death and destruction this pandemic has left in its wake.

In the meantime, listen to today's Scripture telling us: “encourage one another. Build each other up. Keep doing what you are doing” ([1 Thessalonians 5.11](#)).

That really is the sermon.

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But that still leave us with a small problem: what do we do with today's Gospel. Matthew's parable of the talents makes for some seriously uncomfortable reading.

Is this parable really about money? That's how the parable of the talents was read in the churches until very recently. Many Christians went so far as to say that the parable is an endorsement of capitalism, a vindication of the profit incentive, and a condemnation of the failure to invest wisely.

In more recent years, Christians have started reading the parable as an incentive to invest, not our money, or not just our money, but the gifts which God give us, to put our talents to good use. But even with this gentler reading, we really have to face that, no matter how we read it, the parable really is about judgement. And it is pitiless in its judgement of the unproductive servant: *Throw out this worthless slave*, says Jesus, speaking in the voice of the wealthy master in the story. *Throw him into the outer darkness. Take that very last talent from him. Send him into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.* So much for gentle Jesus, meek and mild. This is about judgement: we make good choices, sometimes we make very good choices. Sometimes we invest in others, we sacrifice for others, and if we're lucky, the payback is two-fold. Sometimes we make bad choices. And sometimes we make colossally bad choices. But I think this parable is also about something else. And I'm going to give us a way to re-write the parable completely.

Because I think there is an act three to this parable, there is a next chapter, an unfinished ending; something that Jesus leaves for us to complete.

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Earlier this week, this past Wednesday, we started a Bible study on the book of Ruth. It was wonderful to have so many joining in. One person had parallel Bible by her side—to read and compare the different English translations of the original text. Someone else had a fact-checking Bible commentary on hand. And someone else sill was looking up key words in the original Hebrew online. And everyone had something special to add, something original to offer, in their own voice; from their own experience, their own reading the story. It was truly inspiring. I felt with this group I was re-reading the story of Ruth again for the first time.

Today, I'm going to give us a way to re-write Matthew's parable. So, given that you are all sitting at home, holding your cup of coffee or tea, put away the Bible commentaries. Because our parable re-write, you're not going to find in any commentary. And put away the felt-board figures from Sunday school, because this parable re-write, you didn't learn in Sunday school.

I see in the parable of the talents a story of second chances. Let's rewrite this parable as that kind of story for our times.

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Traditionally, this parable has been read in one of two ways.

Option 1: This parable is about judgement. Jesus wants us to see God as the master. This Scripture is asking us to take account of the talents, gifts, abilities, opportunities God gives us, to take the Good News we have been given and to share it broadly, to invest it. The moral of the story? What we do with our life matters. The choices we make matter. The parable comes sandwiched in between the parable of the wise and foolish virgins and the parable of the sheep and the goats. Both are about what we do and the choices we make whilst the world awaits its final judgement.

But there is another option.

Option 2: This parable is about judgement. Jesus wants us to identify not with the wealthy master but with the third servant. And he wants us to call out the master's exploitation, to judge the abuse. Jesus want us take the side of the little guy. The moral of the story is 'Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely'. We should see in this parable the exploitation of the servants by their master. The third servant is punished not for being unproductive, but for his honest exposé of a corrupt master, for the corruption, for the abuse. We stand in judgement of a master who reaps what he does not sow, gathers what he did not scatter.

So what are we to do? If we read the parable through the eyes of the third servant, we stand in judgement of the wealthy master. If we identify with the judge, we judge the servant who failed to turn a profit.

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But let's not miss this point: the rich man trusted his servants with his money. He entrusts his entire life's savings to them. He trusts them. He gives them no instruction, no directives, no conditions, no limits. He trusts them completely.

The New Testament scholar Paula Gooder tells us that eight talents, in the parable, was the equivalent of eight million pounds in today's money. That's a lot money to put in the hands of a few chose. But the man shared everything he had. The rich master wasn't just sowing money, he was sowing trust: he didn't just invest money, he invested in people. He gave his workers opportunity, and he gave to each equally according to each one's ability, not more, but not less. Two looked after it carefully. Both doubled their money. One was frightened, and hid.

So who is this man who hid his money in the ground? Is it supposed to be each of us hearing this parable? Does Jesus leave us asking—if all those treasures of the kingdom were shared with you, what would you do? And what, after all, are you doing with what you have, no matter how little, how small, how insignificant it may seem?

Let's rewrite the Bible. Let's rewrite this parable. Let's write that chapter I think the parable is really asking for.

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The parable says, "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. So I was afraid. And I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have it; take back what is yours."

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? ..."

No; I'm sorry; that's the old ending. Here's the way I think we all would like the story to end:

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The slave who had received one talent said, 'Master, I was afraid. So I went and hid your talent

in the ground. Here you have it; take back what is rightfully yours'. But his master replied,

'Let's not worry about it now. Take a look at the returns from my other investments. I started with five talents, I gave to one servant, two more talents I gave to the other, and one talent, I gave to you. That's eight talents. And from eight talents, I now have fifteen: I have nearly doubled my money! You didn't make me any money. But I am up seven talents from where I began.

Seven is a good number. Seven is the number of the days of creation. Seven is the number of completion. Seven is the number of fulfilment. And seven is the number of the sabbath rest. I'm up seven talents. I have more than enough. And now my other servants have enough. You didn't make me any money. But I think you have gained something in the process.

We have both learned from the experience: fear is your enemy; next time, don't be so afraid. Study the market, pour over the investments section of the FT, make your sound, informed decisions. And whatever you do, whatever you do, take your chances too. Your Father in heaven has given you everything with reckless abandon; invest your talents with reckless abandon.

And that's just what I am going to do: because I have gained something too. Five talents turned to ten; two talents doubled to four; one talent ... here! This talent is the talent you buried in the ground. It's yours. You couldn't even be bothered to take it down to the bank. Keep it; have this one talent. Oh, I'm not giving it to you:

I'm buying your life back for you! I'm buying you a second chance. Take this talent. Take your talent. Invest it. But invest it with reckless abandon.

What would you do if that were you? What would you do if you had that second chance?

And where is God trying to write that ending—to re-write that story of second chances—into your life.

And can you hear it now, as Jesus speaks to us from this parable, with this one talent he gives to us, and says to us, "Encourage one another. Build each other up. Keep doing what you are doing."