

## **Use it or lose it. Being risk takers for God.**

One of the realities of our humanness is that we have an innate instinct to protect our assets. So we do the rational thing; we insure everything that moves; our profits, our lives, our health, our homes and contents and our cars. You name it and someone will insure it. Whether or not the insurance company will still exist to pay out when the big one happens is another matter. The recent bailout of a major insurance company by the US government demonstrates that the risks of living can never be completely avoided.

The parable before us today is a warning against using God as some kind of insurance policy. God needs followers who will be enterprising risk takers. Living the faith, being a faithful community involves taking risks for God. God needs us to put our gifts to maximum use for the good of the kingdom. The parable we have before us today underscores the requirement that we should not bury any gift, any talent, no matter how small it may be. The backdrop to the parable is the *parousia*, the second coming of Christ, the moment when God turns up for a final inspection to ensure the church has its life in order. Many of us know what it is to live with the uncertainty of such an inspection. Your clergy team have felt this keenly with the prospect of a new bishop arriving to hold us all to account for the state of our parishes and the diocese. It certainly makes one reflect carefully on priorities; what has energy been put into? Has that been the best use of our time and resources? Likewise, our parliamentarians have been through similar examination and scrutiny as the electorate weighs up the legacy of a government and calls it to account. The scriptures remind us that God can and will call us to account at any time, unannounced, like a thief in the night. And when God does, God will be looking to see how we have developed and used our gifts for the extension of the kingdom. The question for us is this, "How will we be placed when that day comes?" The next parable in Matthew's gospel will put the point even more sharply: how well have we fed the hungry, given water to the thirsty, clothed the naked, cared for the sick and the stranger, and visited those in prison? If we have done nothing on those fronts, we might well be classed with the person in today's parable who buried his God given gifts in the ground leaving them unused.

The parable today is long and complex. The master, who is God of course, departs and entrusts his property to others. The master, having shrewdly weighed up the ability of each servant, generously gives to them his wealth according to their ability and then goes away. The five talent person immediately trades and makes five more; the two talent servant also doubles his talents. In the mean

time the one talent servant buries his in the ground. Then we are told that after a long time, the master returns. By now we are coming aware of the real issue behind this story, “How well have these servants been faithful and trustworthy in their management of the talents?” And that is the question before us; can we be trusted with the gifts God has given us? Are we using wisely the gifts God has given or are we doing nothing?

Well, as we know, the first two servants are treated well by the master, and both receive the same accolade, “Well done, good and faithful slave; you have been faithful over little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.” It’s the harsh treatment of the slave with the one talent that shocks our sensibilities with all that weeping and gnashing of teeth and subsequent finger pointing. When the servant is summoned to give account he states that he knew the master to be *hard* and so he was *afraid*. The master never accepts he is hard but all the same he calls the slave “wicked and slothful” and casts him out into eternal darkness. This is harsh is it not? Unlike other slaves in Jesus’ parables, this slave has not beaten anyone up or put them in prison; he hasn’t frittered the talent away either. In fact, he returns it intact.

So how can we understand this harsh treatment? One approach is to look at the people Jesus was addressing. The Jewish community, steeped in the law and its truth and the demands of God, was under a heavy burden of responsibility. The people took their accountability to God seriously and that meant its leaders, the scribes and Pharisees and others, codified their response to God by producing many laws to keep the people in a constant state of readiness for the coming of God. But that regulatory approach to faith meant that the law was understood only by the spiritual elite, so that God’s word was unclear to most of the faithful. Like a single talent, truth was buried in the ground and rendered inaccessible. So this parable could be a pronouncement of judgement against leaders at all levels of the church who paralyse the community of faith by restricting truth, by failing to teach the faith, by limiting the participation of others, or by being too ambivalent to care for the faith community.

A second approach to understanding the harshness of the master is to look more closely at the slave. The defect of the slave in this parable is that he is crippled because he misunderstands who God is. The slave calls the master “hard” and he is “afraid.” He is stuck with the view that God is juridical and obsessed with justice rather than grace. In fact, the master was anything but hard. He entrusted one talent to the slave. That’s 15 years of wages (say \$6-700,000 to the average earner in NZ. It’s

like winning lotto!). But the issue is that the slave was *afraid*. It was timidity; a fear of failing by a person with a limited understanding of God that caused the downfall. All through Matthew's gospel, it is those who are afraid, who are paralysed by anxiety, doubt, and lack of trust who are condemned by Jesus. The same thing is happening here in this parable.

The reality is that God is bigger and more generous than our minds can cope with. God gives gifts boundlessly and with great generosity. Our task is to receive them as unearned and to use them responsibly. It is easy to allow fear and timidity to drive us into a mentality that tried to please God through avoidance of wrongdoing rather than seizing life by the throat and living it to the full.

This parable reminds us not to fall into this particular trap. God is infinitely generous and gracious. God wants us to be bold risk takers for the kingdom and God will meet those risk takers with bigger rewards. Secondly, God makes us gifted people and we must always see ourselves as loaded with talents. But our gifts are not our private possession to be used for ourselves, but gifts of grace given by God according to our ability for the sake of Christ and his Church. What matters is how we use them. God needs you and me to use to the full the gifts he has graciously given us. So we must set about using our gifts diligently. Each of us needs to be personally responsible with our individual gifts; as a parish we need to take corporate responsibility for the gifts we hold together. It may be that we have an ability to work for justice; or to care for those in need; or to offer a simple word of kindness where it is needed. Whatever it is, our world is so deeply embedded in the love of God that one seed planted will flourish to God's glory. And when the master returns suddenly, God's "well done" is our compensation for hours of tireless working for the kingdom.

So then, avoid the danger of being the useless slave. The useless slave, too timid to risk anything, did nothing for God. If we are too paralysed to use our talents for God, we shrivel up and die. On the contrary, the good and faithful servants received surprising rewards. Rather than sitting back and relaxing, they were given greater tasks to do. Such is the reward of the new covenant in Jesus Christ. When we neglect opportunities to plant and nurture the Christian faith, opportunities will be disappear from view. If we trust the love of God and remain open to new possibilities, our own capabilities will increase beyond our wildest imagining. The challenge: to enter into the joy of Christ and receive the glad greeting, "Well done good and trustworthy slave."