

Study following Sunday November 15th

Prepare: Think about the different parables Jesus told and how some seem to be so much clearer to us than others.

Praise: Spend some time giving thanks to God that he is generous and supplies abundant resources for our world.

Passage: Read Matthew 25.14-30

Ponder: Our passage today follows on from the ten bridesmaids' parable and so continues the theme of watching for the kingdom. This parable that has given rise to the use of the word 'talent' in the English language today, but this may skew our understanding of the parable if we are not careful.

- How do you understand the talents and those that receive them in this story?

Recently this parable has been read in a radically new way, heralding the poor third servant as the one who was honourable, whereas the other two could be seen, in the ancient world, as having exploited others for their gain. In this re-reading of the parable the master becomes a ruthless exploiter of others and not someone to be followed.

- How does this new understanding of the story sit with you?

Of course, Jesus was a champion of the poor, as we will see more of next week, and I can see that the harshness of the ending is also difficult to handle. But perhaps we need to re-look at the parable carefully in its context to properly understand it. Firstly it may be helpful to note that, unlike Jesus' parables of nature, his parables with economic background sometimes have a strange twist, such as the master paying everyone the same (Matthew 20.1-16), or the steward who writes off his master's debt to gain favour (Luke 16.1-13). Something else we see here are a number of parallels with the previous parable of the bridesmaids, including a long wait, the final judgement, and the contrast between the lazy and the conscientious. It is also a parable that illustrates Jesus' words uttered earlier in his ministry that 'those who have will be given more' (see Matthew 13.12). Perhaps the most helpful realisation is that Jesus is referring to talents, or bags of gold, as a metaphor, not for our gifts and skills, but the good news of the Gospel, the word of God our Lord and Master.

- Read Psalm 19 verse 10, Psalm 119 verse 72

If the treasure is God's good news then I think this helps us to see that Jesus' teaching is focussed on the 'Kingdom of God'. In this understanding God is a generous God who pours out treasure to his people through Jesus. We see that the servants who were given this great 'wealth' (even the third 'poor' servant was given a huge amount) are the disciples of Jesus - the Church. As Ian Paul points out, the parable implies that if we have received the message of the generous God then we will be transformed into those who take risks and are reckless with the 'treasure' entrusted to us. On the other hand if we have not grasped God's reckless love for us, then we may end up sitting on the treasure we have, not allowing it to transform us or, through us, anyone else.

- Read Matthew 13.1-12

The servants receive treasure just as the soil receives the seed. In places the treasure/seed is multiplied, but in others the treasure/seed is not able to flourish.

- Think which of the servants, or soils you identify with, now and at other times in your life? How might you better reflect Jesus' call to enjoy the 'joy of the master'? (vs 23)

Pray: Pray for those who have received the message of Good news but who haven't yet been transformed. Pray too for those who are sharing the news in a risky way.