

## The Parable of Abundant Life

Zephaniah 1:7,12-18  
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11  
Matthew 25:14-30

Come, Holy Spirit  
Fill the hearts of your people  
And kindle in us  
The fire of your love.

I wonder what your memories are of school assemblies?<sup>1</sup> Filing into the school hall; being greeted by that unique and unforgettable smell of school dinners, PE lessons and floor varnish; then sitting down in tidy rows, with the teachers on chairs at the side, carefully angled to watch both the stage and the children....

Happy days!

And I suspect that, like me, at least once every school year – if not once every term – the subject of the assembly was the Parable of the Talents. Work hard. Concentrate in class. Do your homework. And you will be rewarded. God – whether your teacher, your parents, or the real Living God, will be pleased with you. Will accept you.

But if you don't work hard. Don't use your gifts and abilities – well they will be taken away! Everyone will be Very Disappointed. And you'll be thrown out as worthless.

Hmmm – I wonder if that was what Jesus had in mind when he told this story? Or how Matthew understood it, when he placed it here in his gospel, right between the bridesmaids and the sheep and the goats? Or how the compilers of the Lectionary saw it, when they put our readings from Zephaniah and 1 Thessalonians alongside it for this morning?

Maybe we should have another look....

So, first up. What is a talent anyway? Using the word 'talent' to mean a gift or skill only began in the Middle Ages. In Jesus' day, the word meant a sum of money. And a very large sum of money at that – around 15 years wages for a worker. Over half a million pounds at today's prices<sup>2</sup>.

The master entrusted his slaves (those who had no value) with unbelievable riches. Half a million. A million. A cool 2.5 million pounds. To the first listeners this would have been mind-blowing – why would someone who was so rich offer so much to those who had nothing? And the answer seems to be – just because they were part of his household.

And then he left them to it. He didn't ask or tell them what to do. He just left them to make their own decisions and own choices.

---

<sup>1</sup> Now called Collective Worship!

<sup>2</sup> Oct 23 Average annual wages (pre-tax) approx. £35k x 15 = £525k

And as we know, two of them chose to do something with what they had been entrusted with. And one didn't.

So – if this isn't about skills and gifts, what might it be about?

Perhaps, like in the parable of the workers in the vineyard, and the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price, Jesus isn't really talking about money either – he's talking about the most precious thing there is – the gift of God's grace.

Grace – one of those "Christian words" that we're all expected to understand, but no-one ever explains.

It's what St Paul was writing about at the end of the letter we heard this morning "to possess salvation (by which we mean 'being saved from a life separated from God') through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us, in order that we might live together with him."<sup>3</sup>

Or if that's a bit of a mouthful, try this mnemonic – God's Riches At Christ's Expense.

What the parable is getting at is – what we do with the unbelievably precious gift of God's love and mercy? How do we allow it to shape and change our lives?

Are we like the first slave? Are we so aware of the generosity of God's offer to us of being part of his family...

Of what Jesus called "life in abundance" – a restored relationship with God beginning now and going on into eternity...

A life full of hope and joy (the passage says "enter into the Joy of your master")....

Are we so aware of this, that we grasp it with both hands, and it changes our life forever?

A few minutes ago we sang Amazing Grace. I'm sure some of us know that it was written by John Newton – a profoundly unpleasant man who was a slave-trader, then a slave himself. He was rescued, and on the journey back to England had a dramatic conversion experience. He spent the rest of his life turning his life around, eventually becoming a clergyman, and a leading figure in the early movement to abolish slavery.

A man who took the 5 talents of grace offered him, and responded with a life inspired and fuelled by knowing, and responding to, the love of God.

His story always reminds me of the one of the woman of dubious reputation who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair<sup>4</sup>. Scandalous behaviour! To which Jesus responds that those who have been forgiven much, love much.

So what about the 'one talent' slave. What can we say about them?

It seems to me that they are like the characters we heard about in the OT reading,

"the people who rest complacently..  
"who say in their hearts 'the Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm'..."

---

<sup>3</sup> 1 Thess 5:9,10

<sup>4</sup> Luke 7:36-50

In other words, the ones who, despite being part of the 'household', choose to live their lives as if God doesn't really exist. They receive the offer of the precious gift of God's love and mercy – but choose not to do anything with it, not to allow it to affect their lives or thoughts – and offer back only a distorted image of God to try to justify their actions.

And in doing so, they don't so much *lose* their 'talent' (or get 'thrown into the outer darkness'), as *choose* that option for themselves.

And what about the middle one? The one who received the two talents of grace – where do they fit? Does God offer his grace in varying amounts to different people?

The answer to that is definitely not. God is generosity unbounded. So maybe Jesus included this character to encourage us to think about where we sit between these two extremes of commitment and indifference.

To encourage us to think....

How much have our lives been changed as a result of knowing God?

How much are they *being* changed – still – as we journey on through life?

How much do we grasp God's grace? What it means to be a 'child of God? Not just 'a church-goer', but part of the people of God? Part of God's family?

Because that is what we are. Beloved children of the living God, who has given his all so that we may be so.

My biggest gripe with the interpretation of the 'parable of the talents' as taught in primary school assemblies is that it so easily leaves us with the impression that only if we work hard and use all the gifts that God has given us will we be fit to be accepted by God. That we have to earn his favour.

When nothing could be further from the truth.

God freely offers us the gift of grace. It is our choice whether to accept it – or not – but we do not earn it. It is gift.

And when we accept it, when we become part of God's family, then (and only then) does God call us to work with him in doing his work in the world.

Yesterday, in Messy Church, a baby girl – appropriately called Grace – was baptised into the Big Family of God. She hasn't done a single thing to earn that. It is all by God's grace.

In few moments we will sing the wonderful hymn, 'When I survey the wondrous cross', which not only reminds us of what this has cost God, but sums up our right response, when we accept his gift of grace...

“Were the whole realm of nature mine  
That were an offering far too small  
Love so amazing, so divine  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

We offer ourselves back to God and commit our lives to him in worship and service.  
And out of that, we work with him for his glory.

So – what now?

[At St James’]

In a little while we will gather around the table to receive Communion – the body and blood of Christ – to remember Jesus, as he told us we should. As you receive the bread and wine, may I invite you to see – to recognise – these elements as representing God’s grace, freely given to you. To receive them, knowing you are a beloved child of God – just as you are. And to commit yourself afresh to responding with all that you are.

Amen.

[At St John’s]

So, to finish I’d like to use a prayer written by St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians – a prayer that we may all know in our heads, hearts, souls and bodies what it means to be caught up in God’s grace...

I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Amen.