

Today's gospel reading is the parable of the talents. The same parable is given in Luke as well as Matthew, but there are enough significant differences to suggest that the evangelists did not get their material from the same source. Which makes it even more likely that it is authentically from Jesus. The message is fairly clear: we are responsible for the gifts we have been given and are expected to use them well. The servant who buries his talents in the ground and gives them back to his master lacks gratitude – this is the greater of his failings, which angers the master so much. A life of thankfulness, a life in which we are always conscious of what we have been given, is the surest path to peace of mind. Yet look through any book of prayers, and thankfulness is the least represented. St Ambrose said: "No duty is more urgent than that of giving thanks"; and yet it can never be merely duty – it should be a joy. Gratitude is not simply giving thanks for this or that – we all have things in our life that we would feel hypocritical giving thanks for – but, rather, it is an attitude, a conviction of the heart, a disposition, a habit of mind. It begins with our life and our being, with the fact of our existence, because all of us are contingent beings whose existence is not necessary; God has willed us to exist as an immeasurable act of love: all gratitude and thankfulness can flow from that. The servant who buried the talents his master gave him had no sense of gratitude. He looked only to his own comfort and convenience.

We also have to remember exactly what a talent was: in biblical times a talent was worth six thousand drachma; the drachma was a coin of Greek origin, the same value as the Roman denarius. One silver denarius would have been equivalent to sixty pounds today: we remember that in the parable of the good Samaritan, the Samaritan gave the innkeeper two denarii to look after the man who was set upon: that's about £120 pounds. So, a single talent, being the equivalent of six thousand drachma or denarii, was an awful lot of money: £360,000. In his version of the parable, Luke uses the word 'minas' which was worth about fifty Jewish shekels and, in other translations, this is rendered as 'pounds' – not sterling, I should imagine. In those times, society was awash with various kinds of currency: Roman, Greek, Jewish; you had to be careful what you were paying and to whom.

But of course, the parable isn't about money at all. It is about the gifts that God has given each one of us; and what this parable is first of all saying by using the symbolism of money, is that the Lord has blessed us and graced and invested us with lavish profligacy. There isn't a person living who does not share in this astonishing generosity of love, not even – but especially not! – those whom the world reckons inferior, substandard, unworthy, useless. This is the first refinement: to move from money to freely-given gifts in our understanding of this parable.

The second refinement is to move from exterior to interior. Jesus was not talking about exterior abilities like a facility for maths (maths has always been fearsome for me) or a skill in music, art, medicine, or whatever. This parable is absolutely *not* saying: ‘God gave you the gifts of geometry and design, but you did not become an architect.’ I think that what we do outwardly in life is more about our own personal interests and inclinations, those things that are resonant with our character and temperament, than anything else – including the priesthood, in my opinion. I am sure God is with us in anything we do to survive in this world, but today’s parable is teaching us about what is *interior*, in our deepest heart, the sum of our constant longings and desires, the lodestone that draws us to the north of our fulfilment, meaning and joy. This is where the fuller meaning of the parable of the talents is to be located. Because, within, we encounter those gifts and graces that cannot be acquired by study, knowledge, book-learning or exam qualifications. The Lord Jesus specifically says this:

“I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children.” (Matthew 11:25).

Learnedness and cleverness are external abilities. Kindness, compassion, insight and understanding, the willingness to serve and be of service, the ability to listen, to show care and concern, are not. All these things may seem, at first glance, to be terribly soft and sentimental, but they

are decidedly not: they are diamond-hard. They take immense psychological and spiritual stamina. I think, actually, we all know this. If you have ever spent any time with a needy person from whom you really could not in conscience turn away, you will certainly know it. Kindness is never an afterthought – it is deliberately willed; compassion is not detached pity, it is an identification of heart; insight and understanding are not acquired, they are innate and impelled by love; to serve can never be a duty, but is always a joyful surrender; to listen, show care and concern, is not a technique that can be picked up from an instruction manual, it is the fruit of a deeply-sooted sense of solidarity with humanity. This is entirely what the parable in today's gospel is about.

Sometimes you discover an interior gift that you didn't even know you had. As a psychotherapist I regularly see clients who are in distress or uncertainty about themselves – online mainly, in the present circumstances – and there are times when, faced with psychological suffering, I just have to say to myself: 'I don't know what to do next. I feel useless. I'm not making any difference.' And this admission of helplessness, *together* with the willingness and determination to continue being with the client, *is in itself* a gift of deep, rich proportions. To know that we *don't* know is the grace of wisdom; to stick with something even though we *feel* like giving up is the gift of courage and strength; to trust *without* seeing the outcome is the grace and gift of

surrender. Because when we don't know, and when we don't give up, and when we trust in whatever outcome reveals itself, we realise that we are being held in a hand infinitely more protecting and more comforting than our own. And, returning to the absurd analogy of money, even one of these 'talents' is worth a small fortune.

All of the parables of Jesus have a feeling-tone, an emotion at their core, which the Lord no doubt wanted to pass on to his listeners. This was often – perhaps always – the point of them. For example: the parable of the Good Samaritan is intended to evoke a feeling for the beauty of unconditional compassion; that of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, a sense of deep consolation in the love-affair between God and true humility; and the parable of the Talents, from today's gospel, an emotion close to the shame of regret. It was an embarrassed, guilty and fearful servant who returned to his master exactly what he had been given – unappreciated and unused. The anger of the master is, I suppose, proportionate.

This Sunday has been designated the 'Sunday of the Poor,' when we are encouraged to reflect in our minds and hearts the plight of the poor of the world. God knows there are enough of them. This suggests a way in which we can use, with thankfulness, the abundant interior gifts and graces that God has given us. In St Matthew's gospel, the first line of the Beatitudes is: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In St Luke's gospel, we have:

“Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” Which is closest to what Jesus actually said? Probably Luke. As a good Jew, Matthew probably could not stomach the idea of material poverty being a blessing from God; in his day, it was considered (along with illness and suffering) to be the effect of sin. Luke, however, who was not a Jew, had no trouble identifying the poverty-stricken as those especially beloved of God. They are, in any case, two sides of the same coin. The Hebrew word for ‘poor’ in either the material or the spiritual sense, is *anawim*. This roughly translates as ‘helpless little ones’ and God is in love with them. His heart is smitten with them. It does not matter whether the *anawim* are materially poor, spiritually poor, or both: the homeless alcoholic slumped in a shop doorway soaked in urine, the single mother going to the local foodbank every week, the immigrant family housed in appalling conditions that no one else would put up with, the individual struggling with obsessive scruples, the elderly person who will be on their own on Christmas Day, the guilt-ridden who cannot feel the love that God has for them, those who think they have committed sins that cannot be forgiven – the world is floating on a sea of human tears and suffering. Our greatest gift and the most significant ‘talent’ that any of us have been given – which is first and foremost an interior disposition of the heart – is to dry those tears and alleviate that suffering in any way that we can. It is a spiritual practice; it is a consciously willed way of living; it is a personal decision; it is

an acceptance of the path of love in all its implications. This way and path takes courage and strength and determination; but once we have chosen it, we are using the talents that our master has given us. In today's gospel the master was so angry with the servant who buried what he was given because to *all* this he said: 'I don't want it. I am not grateful for it. Here – take it back.'

God forbid that any of us should say that.