

TFTD 25.30 Tuesday April 8th

The parable of the talents: Luke 19.11-28



Today we read Luke's version of the parable of the talents. Normally, in church we read Matthew's version of this parable so again we have this sense that Luke's version 'isn't quite right' because it's not the version we are used to hearing. But we have to bear in mind that it may be Matthew's version that 'isn't quite right'.

One of the obvious differences between Matthew and Luke is that they have Jesus telling the story in different places. Matthew has Jesus tell this parable in Jerusalem during his standoff with the Pharisees. But Luke has Jesus tell this parable in Jericho, on his way to Jerusalem just after his encounter with the blind beggar and then with Zacchaeus.

And so we wonder whether there is significance in a parable about people being given amounts of money just after an encounter with a poor person and a rich person. Luke's Gospel helpfully tells us why Jesus told this parable by including the explanation that Jesus told it to the people 'because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately'.

So this is a parable, according to Luke's understanding, about how his followers were to cope with the waiting time between his death, resurrection and ascension and the coming of his kingdom which would in fact be happening later.

Another difference in Luke's telling compared to Matthew's telling is the presence in Luke's version of the citizens of the country. Jesus said that they didn't want the 'nobleman' to become 'king' so they sent representatives to lobby against this. And then later they protest when more money is given to the one who had already been given a lot of money. Who are these people supposed to represent?

The most obvious reading of this parable is that the nobleman who would be king is Jesus. The servants he chooses to give his wealth to are his faithful followers. They have to invest his wealth, which is the good news, while he is gone, and to grow the resources of the kingdom ready for the return of Christ the King. Those who fail to grow the kingdom will have the good news taken away from them. Those who actively oppose the kingdom will be destroyed. And so the citizens of the country who oppose the rule of the king are people who do not embrace the kingdom of God and will speak up to defend those who fail to build it.

And yet we recoil from this interpretation because if we accept it, it feels as if we are accepting a view of Jesus as a harsh ruler who even seems to delight in cruelty ("as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.")

At this point we have to remind ourselves that this is a parable. Jesus told it to make a point and to get us thinking. Because normally a king whose servants did not serve him well would punish them. And a king who found people agitating against him would punish them even more. We know Jesus is a different sort of king. He is going to Jerusalem to give his life for us and for the whole world, not lobby to be made King of Galilee.

But he wants his people to remember that when he is no longer there, he is coming back one day and his followers should focus on that and respond accordingly, diligently working to build up resources for the kingdom, taking risks when necessary, taking things one step at a time if that is what conditions demanded, but always working away in preparation for the return of Jesus as King, even when this work is very hard and the results are meagre.

And to keep doing this hard work while many other ‘fellow citizens’ are doing nothing for the kingdom or even working actively against it. Jesus is telling his followers not to worry about them. You don’t want to be one of them. You want to be a builder of my Kingdom. That’s what you want to be doing in this in between time, while I am gone and before I return. And with that final lesson learned, Jesus goes to Jerusalem.

Robin Pye