

Sermon by The Reverend Michael Cluett for 15th November

Matthew 25: 14-30

The parable of the talents is clearly about responding creatively to a challenge, from God or from other people, and acting responsibly.

It sounds very much as though the man who was going abroad had a fair idea about the abilities of his servants. He entrusted the most to the servant who, eventually was able to provide the greatest return. But the challenge was clear, to be a wise steward of the master's wealth. The master, although keen to increase his fortune was also encouraging his servants to act responsibly and to use their initiative. As he made demands upon them, he expected them to act wisely and well. The third servant failed in his duty because he refused to make any effort, even the most minimal of putting the money in the bank. The moneylenders of Jesus' day gave an excellent rate of interest (unlike today!!). there could be no gain, because he would not risk the pain.

But this parable is not only about using wisely what we have been given. It is also about our expectations of one another. The master before he goes off could have put the money in the bank himself, but that would have been to miss the point. If he hadn't had any expectations of his servants they wouldn't have been challenged to grow in creativity and responsibility. And it was important for the master to set his sights high, he wasn't going to be satisfied with inactive and immature servants. This theme is echoed in our Epistle where Paul is urging the Thessalonians to be prepared for the sudden arrival of the Day of the Lord. If they are to be ready, they must be alert and clear-headed. They cannot risk being caught off guard. Once again, there can be no gain without pain, we must be alert while others sleep. But the hardship is not an end in itself, it is for our good. It's like those who keep fit or go to a slimming club to lose weight, or watch some famous celebrity's fitness video and follow the regime. I see that Joe Wicks is going to restart his lockdown fitness class on, is it You Tube, I'll have to look out for it. Or maybe it's regular jogging that we do to keep fit. You have to put a bit of effort in, you have to be disciplined in what you eat, to get the end result you want. And as long as these demands are not too excessive, they can challenge and stretch us and occasionally be fun, and we end up achieving even more than we might have hoped for. You have to have a bit of will-power and you have to want to do it, you have to have a goal to aim for.

It is often helpful to have a role model, someone we see as the ideal and we set out to aim for it. Think of all those young boys who look up to a famous footballer and say to themselves 'that's what I'm want to be when I grow up.' I am so out of touch with football I couldn't actually name one, apart from Marcus Rashford who has been highlighting the plight of children who go hungry during school holidays. He would be a good role model, a footballer who has a sense of social concern rather than just use their enormous wealth on themselves. Others look to a pop singer or an actor, someone they can try and emulate.

As Christians it is important for us to have a role model - and, of course, we look to Jesus, we aim to conform our lives to His. But we also have the example of other Christians, I have a great love for the saints, learning from their lives how to live out my Christian vocation. We need positive examples of holy living to encourage us in our journey of faith. All too often we hear of Christians who have failed to live up to their calling, it's so often the bad news that makes the headlines, isn't it, and this gives the Church a bad press and makes us despondent. We can easily lose sight of all the wonderful Christians who are using their talents for the greater good and to the glory of God, all the unsung heroes who day by day endeavour to bring God's kingdom of love into the lives of others. Perhaps we can think of people we have known and know now who do just this, often without any fuss or fanfare.

Putting ourselves once again in the shoes of the master in our Gospel reading, if we expect little of our fellow human beings we will seldom be able to see beyond our poor expectations. If we regard others highly, seeing them as capable of greatness, we give them room to blossom and grow. Our demands are to be for their good, however, and not simply to highlight their failure in order to boost ourselves in comparison. Where we have the genuine good of others at heart, we do well to expect much, accepting their limitations, but always encouraging them to grow.

This creative authority isn't just for managers and bosses, it's for each of us to act responsibly, respecting our own lives and the lives of others. In doing so we continue to grow into the people God created us to be.

When we try to do something worthwhile for God, we may find the going tough at times, but we know that if we have something we truly want there has to be a struggle to get it - otherwise it isn't always going to be worth the effort.

The Gospel of Christ makes demands on us. This isn't to satisfy an authoritarian judgemental God, but it's to challenge us to grow, to grow more like God. And that has to be worth some pain. Sometimes Christians get it wrong and think one has to self-inflict the pain, think of those who in former days wore hairshirts or whipped themselves, thinking that one had to subjugate frail human nature to achieve the goal of union with God.

The pain of Christian discipleship is more often going to be standing up for one's faith against the challenges of our secular world. It's not about doing this in a pious, holier than thou way, making oneself a martyr for the cause. But it's facing up to the temptations and pressures of daily living and saying how do I respond to that, how as a Christian do I tackle this or that issue. And often the pain is in not finding a definite answer to the problem, maybe there is no black and white solution to every situation we face.

We must be true to how we see God, what we think is the genuine Christian response, 'to thine own self be true; and it follows, as night follow day, thou canst not then be false to any man,' was Polonius' advice to his son, Laertes, in Hamlet. I don't think we can better that, can we?