Reflection: The Parable of the Talents: Matthew 25:14-30

There is always a danger when one reads one of Jesus’ parables on its own and out of the specific context of the Gospel as a whole that we can be left with a bit of a one-sided understanding of God and of God’s relationship with God’s people. In the case of the Parable of the Talents, God could be conceived as being like a Celestial Exam Board adjudicator who has given us a syllabus to study, things to learn and do, rules to keep. One day God will come and set the final examination and see who passes and who fails. There will be especially good things in store for those who pass and get good marks, and bad things for those who fail or who get bad marks.

The truth about Jesus, of course, that we get from reading the gospels as a whole is that Jesus declared that he had come to call everyone and not the righteous but sinners. He had come, he said, to seek and to save the lost. He warned the Scribes and the Pharisees that the tax-collectors and prostitutes, who would have failed any moral examination of their day, would be going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of them.

In fact, the Parable of the Talents, which can be found in both Matthew and Luke’s gospels, shows how seemingly ordinary individuals are the ones who more often than not make the most of the blessings granted from God. The parable begins with a master entrusting ‘talents’ to his servants before setting out on a long journey. One servant receives five talents, another receives two, and the final is granted just one talent. Although today’s scholars sometimes disagree as to the exact meaning of ‘talent’ in this parable, all agree that it must be of significant worth – like valuable gold or silver, for instance. Tom Wright suggests that it amounted to what a labourer could expect to earn in fifteen years.

Upon returning home, the master learns that the first and second servants used their talents to significantly increase the value of the investment they were granted and so they are rewarded accordingly. The third servant however buried his talent and did not enjoy the gains of his two predecessors. When called on to account for his behavior, he claims that fear prevented him from embracing his talent. And so the Master reprimands the third servant for being lazy and casts him out.

What lessons can we glean from the Parable of the Talents in today’s world? Is there something about opportunity and accountability in our everyday lives that speaks to us through this cryptic little story?

Is the meaning in realizing that God rewards those who put effort into bettering their lives and the lives of those in their community rather than sitting back, burying their talents, and awaiting salvation at the hands of others?

The servants are not given an equal share of talents, just as in our world today wealth is unequally distributed across the world. And yet the person with just two talents put them to work all the same and doubled their property, just like the servant with an initial five talents. Are we called, therefore, to resist comparing ourselves unfavorably with those around us who have more than we do, and instead be grateful for and to make the most of what we have got or received? The first servant may have initially been blessed with the most, but both he and his two-talent counterpart had exactly what they needed – and both received the same reward.

Consider the three Zimbabwean women in the ‘Talents of Hope’ campaign as excellent examples of how taking a little and investing it with imagination and innovation has changed their lives and the lives of the families and communities around them. Take Netsai Kateera – mother of three, from Nihire village, Mutoko.

Netsai and her family were struggling to make a living from their farm, when she discovered a welding course run under the BRACT project. She completed the three month course in 2017 along with nine other women. She says that her husband fully supports her chosen profession, which has traditionally been a man’s work. Netsai now works as part of a larger business called Star Welding. They make and repair agricultural implements as well many other items, like bicycles. The profit from the business has transformed her life in many ways.

Or Taindonzwa Kapfudzaruwa – a carer for her disabled husband, grandmother of seven, and farmer in Mudzi. Because of the changing weather patterns, her farm was hugely affected: ‘No matter how hard we worked we could not improve production and some years the poor rains meant that we harvested nothing’, she said. The BRACT project taught Taindonzwa new farming techniques which were better suited to the sandy conditions of her land. She was delighted to see that her yields improved in the very first year of changing her methods. ‘I have been able to change the way I farm, even at my age,’ she says.

And then there is Blessings Muzori – 51 year old wife, mother and farmer from Kazingizi village, Mutoko. With farming becoming increasingly becoming difficult, Blessings’ husband left the village for the city to find work, leaving Blessings and the children to care for the farm. This put a strain on their marriage. Through BRACT, she was given climate smart agriculture training. She also joined her local ISAL (a village savings and lending group) which has invested in a sunflower oil pressing business through which extra income has been created. Blessings’ husband has returned home and their life is so much better. ‘BRACT has transformed me,’ she says.

What, then, of the third servant in the parable and his apparent lack of motivation? In today’s terrifying world we can all be tempted to hide and isolate ourselves from others. The COVID pandemic created huge panic for some people afraid of how the virus might impact on them and how they were going to cope. Many scholars of the Bible wonder whether the servant may have had good reason to doubt the Master; landowners are not known for their kindness and generosity, and we might be wrong for thinking too quickly that Jesus had God in mind as the Master in the narrative.

Speaking truth to power, standing your ground against unjust structures is costly and dangerous and it is so much safer to tow the line, to keep your head down and to say nothing. How often have you failed to speak up for somebody who is hurting, choosing instead to keep quiet? Rise up, stand up the Christian Aid slogan says, but it can be really hard. But speaking out, writing to your MP, standing with the powerless and not the powerful can make all the difference. It only takes a grain of mustard seed to be planted well for a huge tree to grow in its wake. This parable could make us all who feel overwhelmed by the enormity of problems facing us and the world today apply our unique talents and blessings to daily life and let God give the growth to our endeavours and labours.

Jesus still calls individuals like you and me, to find our inner strength and potential and to make the kingdom a reality on earth as well as heaven; to find little ways to make a real difference in the world. Mother Theresa spoke of it as doing little things with great love.

Christian Aid believes that united in hope and showing dignity, equality, love and justice to all, then great things can be done in the name of God, our talent-giver, inspirer and innovator.

*Reverend Andrew Sully* *Christian Aid*