

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY NOVEMBER 19th

Reading: Matthew 25: 14 – 30 [Twenty fourth (24th) after Pentecost]

Today is the penultimate Sunday of the Christian year/calendar. Next Sunday is designated 'Christ the King' and a fortnight from now will be Advent and a new Church Year.

Here's another parable which is odd in detail. Like others before it, this too appears to commend bad practices and/or condemn good ones. Former Prime Minister John Howard said that the parable gave credence to the protestant work ethic, encouraging the business practices of our free enterprise system. New Testament scholars Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh in their "Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels" see it otherwise: they comment that "*the elitist reading of the parable is congenial to Westerners conditioned to treat gain as both legitimate and proper*" [page 150].

The story in Matthew 25 begins with a pronounced 'again', [Greek: ζσπερ – 'as' or 'like'] suggesting similar themes and continuity with Matthew's own sources and emphases. We have noted previously that Matthew has its own distinctive emphasis on faith expressed in good deeds. This is one of his parables underlining this point. Taken as 'one' with the preceding text, we find here "*the meaning of being 'good and faithful' is not mere theological correctness, passive waiting or strict obedience to clear instructions, but active responsibility that takes initiative and risk*" [Eugene M Boring in the 'New Interpreters' Bible commentary on Matthew, page 453] (refer last week's discussion of the 'wise and foolish bridesmaids').

Although originally purely a (large) sum of money, from this passage in Matthew's Gospel the word 'talent' emerged in language as descriptive of God-given gifts. Here it is simply a large amount of money – often quoted as the wages of a day labourer earned over a fifteen (15) year period, signalling a large trust by the land owner. Matthew here inflates the amount of the trust 30-fold from that found in the same story in Luke (each drawing from the common source, 'Q'). In his commentary on this passage Bill Loader says it is clear that Matthew is 'spinning a yarn'. "*Money*", he says, like oil in the previous pericope, "*is an image of what is potent in the kingdom and for the kingdom. It may also been seen as a way of talking about the Spirit or at least about the life of God within us*".

So much of the detail of this parable needs to be over-looked to extract the 'heart' of its meaning. Is the discriminatory practice of the master in allocating talents to be read as how God works? Indeed, the story appears contradictory when considered in its original cultural context. Malina and Rohrbaugh (above) note that "*in the 'limited good' world of first-century Mediterranean, seeking 'more' was morally wrong. Because the pie was 'limited' and already distributed, an increase in share of one person automatically meant a loss for someone else. Honourable people, therefore, did not try to get more, and those who did were automatically considered thieves*" [page 149]. On this count, western interpretations using the story to validate practices of prudence in investments and money-making would seem wish-based.

The 'Master' in this story is both understanding and gracious to the first two servants, but harsh and condemnatory of the third servant. New Interpreters Commentary says of this, "*the hearers must decide which characterisation of the master to accept. The parable has led them in both directions, and it creates a dilemma rather than resolving one*" [page 453].

Commentating on the version of this parable found in Luke (19:11 – 27), Kenneth Bailey [*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*] envisages the historical background as being in the 'nobleman' caused to travel "*to a far country*" there to find out if he is to receive anointing and delegation of a king. Herod the Great, he notes, "*had made a trip to Rome in 40 B.C. seeking a Roman appointment as king, and his son, Archelaus, made a similar journey in 4 B.C. to argue his case*" [page 398]. The absence of such figures is the opportunity of opponents to assume power. Later, Bailey notes, "*Herod's trip was successful ... whilst his*

son Archelaus was banished. No one knows how such a perilous journey will end“ [page 401]. In the nobleman’s absence, the servants must decide whether their return will be with enhanced power. In effect, the ‘test’ of the parable is, to quote Bailey, “Are you (servants) willing to take the risk and openly declare yourself to be my loyal servants (during my absence) in a world where many oppose me and my rule?” [page 401]. The parable is one of the servant’s faithfulness or otherwise, not their abilities to ‘turn a profit’.

Against all this, Malina and Rohrburgh (above) provide another, different pathway for pursuit of this parable’s meaning. They note an early Christian commentary on a (now lost) version of this parable from the “*Gospel of the Nazoreans*”, by one ‘Eusebius’ who wonders whether the rewards for the characters in this story have been mixed and it is actually the first who should be the recipient of harsh words (in that version the first “*squanders his master’s substance with harlots and flute girls*”) [refer page 150]. Giving the passage the heading of “Story Illustrating a Peasant Truism: The Rich Get Richer”, they suggest an identification with the third slave in the reading of this section. “*The reason for the behaviour is a truism in peasant society (v29): Those with more get more and have in abundance, those with nearly nothing have even that taken from them. And the master’s final decision is to publicly shame the ‘worthless’ slave*” [page 150]. Ironic realism perhaps?

However, one wonders how such an understanding would serve Matthew’s purposes, which are clearly theological and cautionary. Like the groom at midnight, the timing of the Master’s return is unknown, yet must be awaited for the accounting that will take place. Matthew leaves the issues of both differing empathies for the servants and character portrayals aside, unresolved. This parable/allegory must be read within the overall progression and unfolding of Matthew’s story of Jesus, which separates the good and the bad, the righteous and unrighteous, the ready and the unprepared before the time of the Messiah’s (re-) appearance.

Despite its many apparent inconsistencies as a piece of scripture, Matthew 25: 14 – 30 tells of a master who has taken the initiative, based in trust. The response requires faithfulness, continuing to hope in the coming Kingdom, even though its fulfilment seems delayed. There is no place for fearful reserve. It perhaps asks the preacher’s question: “*What have you done with what you’ve been given?*”

Kenneth Bailey concludes his treatment of this parable quoting a British journalist who once asked Mother Teresa how she kept going, knowing she could never meet the needs of all the dying in the streets of Calcutta. She replied, “*I am not called to be successful; I’m called to be faithful*” [which Bailey notes is ‘Very bad capitalism! Don’t invest in her company’].

THEMES (again – as last week): Faithfulness, persistence, living in the meantime.
