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Matthew 25:14-30

Sermon by Peter Blackwood

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As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' I am getting really nervous that news of this story could find its way into the Industrial Relations debate. On the bright side, we will be able to come back to this story after the IR legislation goes through our parliaments and realize that the end result could have been a lot worse.

Matthew has recounted the parable of the bridesmaids waiting in various stages of preparedness for the bridegroom. Then follows this parable of the talents. A master entrusts huge amounts of money to his slaves – we are talking huge amounts. We are talking millions of dollars. By shrewd dealings two of the servants were able to double the money and return twice the sum to their master. By burying his in the ground the third servant was able to return the talent given to him in good order. The two servants were rewarded for their diligence. The third was punished for his prudence. I personally think he has a strong case against the master for wrongful dismissal.

A traditional lesson that this story has for us is that just as the master gave money to his servants so they might be stewards of his possessions, so God gives gifts and abilities to us, his servants that we might also respond by being good stewards of what belongs to God. The parable speaks of the increase that comes from the use of these gifts and the rewards that await the faithful who exercise their talents in the service of the Kingdom, and the consequences that befall the ones who bury their talents.

Lesson? Use your talents or the talent is lost. Every musician knows the importance of practice if the ability to make music is to be maintained. Every arthritis sufferer knows that you keep using the effected joint or it seizes up.

This reading of the story calls us to use our lives and all that God has given us in faithful and risky service as stewards of his gifts. That is a traditional lesson that arises from this parable and probably comes from the language link we make between 'talent' as a unit of money in the story and our use of the word 'talent' to refer to our gifts and abilities, a spin probably unintended by Matthew or Jesus. Luke's version of the story does not attract this interpretation – he uses a different unit of money.

So let's try another reading.

I think the master in the story is unfair. The servant entrusted with one talent returned the talent to his master in good order. He had played safe. He had not risked losing the money. Besides, no instructions had been given as to what should be done with the money. Why is the punishment so harsh? Strictly speaking there had been no disobedience because no instructions had been given. What are we to make of this? It was hard for Matthew's church to know how to live out its calling. How should they organise themselves, to whom should they proclaim the gospel? What were they to do? The master had left it all to them and had gone away without leaving specific instructions. It was different while he had been with them. He had been there in person to guide and direct. By the power of the Holy Spirit the master was still with his church to guide and direct. But it was different.

We can understand that. We know we depend on the power of the Holy Spirit for guidance and direction in our own lives and in the lives of our churches. We pray constantly for that guidance, but doesn't the Holy Spirit mumble something shocking. Have you ever noticed that God's answer to our prayers is very often in a language that is hard for us to understand, or else in a voice that is too clear for our liking, so we turn a deaf ear. Knowing what is wanted of us is not always easy because the master has gone away without leaving detailed instructions. What instructions the Bible gives us often leaves the church in greater confusion. At different times and places the church has been confused about warfare and slavery and social structures. The Uniting Church has been confused over many matters — over baptism, sexuality, ministry to name just a few. The church is unable to agree on the Bible's directing and Jesus cannot be called in for consultation.

How then are we to proceed? Does Matthew's Jesus offer some help?

Matthew 25:24-27 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' 26 But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.'

Sure, the master had given no instructions but the servant really did know what was expected because he knew the master. He knew exactly what he should do with the talent because he knew his master would expect interest on his return.

Like the servants in the story we are left entrusted with gifts and graces, our master has gone away, Jesus is no longer physically present for us, and we have no specific instructions. How are we to know what to do?

Like the servants in the story we can know what to do by knowing the Master. In matters of life and religion our natural predisposition is to be told what we should do. People asked Jesus what they should do. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Should we pay taxes to Caesar?" "How many times should I forgive my brother?"

One of the frustrations in the church is that a whole lot is said about Jesus without enough specific advice on how to live our lives. Should there not be more sermons on the evils of drink or on marriage or on justice or on race relations or on peace. This might very well be a great benefit. Perhaps the church could give more direction for people. But at the end of the day people will take their own direction. The preacher's sermon was a good one if I agreed with what was said. It is harder to shake the minister's hand if the message has confronted my life style. People will take their own advice.

But for Christian people the advice they give themselves will be shaped by the one who is at the centre of all they believe. Making life's decisions in the light of the knowledge of God and of his Son Jesus Christ will show up signposts worth following. That is why the church continues to proclaim Christ more than life styles. 1 Corinthians 2:2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

Indeed that is to be the motivation for all our proclamation, whether it be from pulpits or through the service agencies of the church or through the Christian kindnesses shown to a neighbour. So that God can be seen in and by the world. Matthew 5:16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give

glory to your Father in heaven.

The more we know the master, the more we know of his grace and love, of his desire to reach out to the powerless, of his passion for calling the wicked back to himself, the more we will be caught up in life styles that are characterised by grace and love and giving power and healing and influencing others for God's good purposes.