

**Pentecost 27**  
**16/11/2008**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Judges 4:1 – 7**

**Psalm 123**

**1 Thessalonians 5:1 - 11**

**Matthew 25:14 - 30**

(Sermon preached by Rev. Harry Kerr)

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When we read the parable of the talents we are encouraged to hear it as urging us to use our God expects us to use the gifts the has given us to the best of our ability and that God will reward us if we do.

And yet if we read the passage carefully, that interpretation doesn't seem quite right. At the end of the passage, the master is described and describes himself as one who *reaps where you did not sow, and gathers where you did not scatter seed*. He is also the one who *throws the slave who does not measure up into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* Is that really a picture of the God we know in Jesus. We need to be clear that when Jesus speaks of talents he is not talking about God given gifts at all. He is talking about money, pure and simple, large amounts of money. We can compare the slaves who do well with CEO's at the big end of town on grossly inflated salaries and bonuses. It sounds very much like the "prosperity gospel" where God rewards the rich by making them richer, the full on American dream in fact. So it's timely for us to question this way of hearing the parable when that same dream is falling apart. Is our God the one who encourages us to go out and get rich with the promise of yet greater wealth and who casts the people who don't make it into outer darkness?

How might we hear it differently and let Jesus take us to quite different place? To someone setting out in business, the story might be good news. Jesus' hearers and Matthew's readers were probably not rising aspirational voters. It is likely they were poor peasants, struggling to survive on the land, ground down by high taxing tyrants and their cynical religious accomplices. They were the Mallee farmers, the asylum seekers. To them the story would not be good news. They knew about absentee emperors who delegated their power to local petty tyrants. These people were not interested in their subjects but only on keeping on the right side of the emperor so that he would give them still greater rewards.

For the people of the ancient world, there was no such thing as wealth creation. The entire God created wealth already existed. So if one person got richer, someone else got poorer. The wealth has to come from somewhere. At the time when our wealth was booming, more and more people were living and dying on the streets, surviving in caravan parks and ending up in jail. The slaves who did well are not heroes, even though they seem to flourish. They are thieves.

The God we know in Jesus does not belong in this picture although much of the time we live as if he does. Next week we will go on to the end of the chapter when the Christ the judge will say *in so far as you take care of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you do it to me.*

Our attention turns to the third slave. As far as the master is concerned he is the ultimate loser. He couldn't face the heat of the free market. He couldn't even bother to invest his master's money in fixed interest where it would be government guaranteed and safe, at least for the time being. There is no place for him in the master's world. The master is a hard man and he rewards the slaves who know how to be hard men. As far as the master is concerned he is thrown *into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* Where is he really? An aspect of the New Testament and of the gospel of Jesus that we don't talk about much, is the suggestion that the followers of Jesus live in a different world. We don't belong in the world where wealth is rewarded by greater wealth, where the hard men are the winners, in which we measure each other and measure ourselves by how much we have and how much we don't have. The community of the baptised is called out of this world. Our citizenship is in heaven. We know that another world is possible because we live there already. We live in a world where losers are made winners in Jesus. We live in the world where Jesus lives. St Paul reminds us: *You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was rich, yet he became poor for your sake, that through his poverty you might be rich.* He turns this world upside down. He brings the losers home. We are the people who *are poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.* Groups like the "L'Arche Communities of disabled and able bodied people sharing life, or Urban Seed in Melbourne, or the Choir of Hard Knocks show us that this world is real. It happens.

This chapter begins with Jesus saying: *the kingdom of heaven will be like this.* Is he telling us that the kingdom begins at the point where the world we know has given up on us and tuned us out because we don't fit? As followers of Jesus we know that another world is possible and that is where we are because that is where Jesus is. That is the life we can invite people to share. In the reading from Thessalonians, St Paul reminds us to be ready for the day of the Lord is coming when we least expect it. He goes on: *The propaganda machines will still be pumping out reports of secure borders and boom times ahead, when suddenly the whole world will be turned on its head. It will be like the sudden rapid onset of labour for a pregnant woman: unpredictable, intense, and inescapable!* That's a fairly free translation but does sound awfully familiar right now. The people who the world has thrown into outer darkness and the people who know they don't belong are actually living in the light. *God has not set us up for failure and punishment, but to be rescued from all that into the life opened up for us by our Lord, Jesus the Messiah.* So we know who we are. We know that the financial crisis and the G20 are not what it is all about. We can live differently in a world where the losers, the destitute and the cursed go to the top of the agenda, where true wealth is knowing God's generosity.

We might think of someone like Aung San Syi Khi who confronts the powerful as the ultimate loser but who stands firm because she really lives in a different place. She knows another world is possible because she is already there.