

Pentecost 24
15/11/2020

Mark the Evangelist

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Psalm 123

Matthew 25:14-30

Talented

In a sentence

The 'talent' the church is given to exercise is grace, which is to yield grace-fullness in us

As over the last couple of weeks, so also today the basic lesson of our gospel reading is, 'Be prepared'. The suggestion is that God has in some way been absent and will return unexpectedly, and with God's return comes the day of reckoning, or judgement. The three slaves seem to represent our two basic options while the master is away – to be fruitful with what is left to us, or not to be fruitful.

Once again, then, a moral understanding of the parable is possible. Believers are called to the living of a good life. Where we have an abundance, we are to share. Where there is despair, we are to be sources of hope. Where there is doubt we are to bring faith; where there is hatred, love; where there is injury, we are to bring pardon. We are, then, to give away more, and to receive more, in God's special economy of grace.

But those who are now accustomed to hearing my sermons will have noticed that I usually acknowledge and then set aside the moral dimensions of readings like this one. This is not because the moral dimensions are unimportant, but because the basic moral compass of the Scriptures is not usually that much different from the moral compass of any society. What the Scriptures value in generosity, honesty, forgiveness, kindness, gentleness, self-control and so on, are also valued in the wider society.

This is to say that, for the most part, we already know what is required of us morally – whether we are believers or not. 'Don't waste your talent' is what the footy coach or the music teacher says to a gifted but lazy student, as much as God might say it so a distracted community of faith. Labouring the point in preaching would be too much a waste of an opportunity. For while anyone can read the parable in this way, the community of faith which gathers to read it is not 'anyone'. We are Christians. This is not simply Jesus the wonderful teacher we hear addressing us in this parable, but Jesus the *wonder* – the Jesus who has died, who is risen, and who will come again as the means of the grace of God to us. Jesus is the one who makes sense for us of the kingdom of God, who embodies in his own experience our judgement by God, and so who is the key to our understanding of how we stand before God.

This requires another way of hearing these parables. And so, last week we heard the call to be ready but also saw that Jesus himself can be seen to be the wise bridesmaid who awaits the coming of the bridegroom, and can be seen even as the oil given to us to burn as we await the approach of God. This is what we might call a christological reading, which yields a very difficult result from the important but more narrowly moral reading. A christological reading is not a 'natural' or 'ordinary' reading; it is more like an allegory of an allegory. We can read these texts in this way because, with the coming of

Jesus in death and resurrection, they cease to be texts like others – simple moral teaching – and become texts about Christ himself – a revealing of the means of grace.

So, what does a christological reading of this parable of the three servants look like? It helps to begin by noting a problem in translation. The translation of the central word we have heard this morning is ‘talent’. The Greek word is in fact ‘*talanton*’, and is simply transliterated into English. The original meaning, however, was not our contemporary sense of ‘skills’ or ‘gifts’ or ‘abilities’, but ‘a thing weighed’ and, by extension, a quantity of money (silver or gold being weighed out to the required amount). Our modern translation, then, as the ‘parable of the talents’, can distract us by suggesting that the parable is about what we know today to be ‘talents’. The parable, however, only suggests that each of the slaves is given a measure of *something* with which they are then to do something more. A moral reading considers that something to be our gifts and abilities, our intellect or our money, or whatever it seems that we have in some special measure.

But if we read this as the *church*, so that the parable is now specifically about *believers*, the question is: What is the specific ‘talent’ the *church* has? What is it which is given to us in some special measure? To this it must be answered: the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ; or the intimate and childlike knowledge of God as Father, as Jesus himself knew God; or the gift of the Holy Spirit – all different ways of saying the same thing. And now the parable becomes something quite different from a simple reading about using our gifts and abilities wisely. Now it asks – in what measure have you been given *grace*, and what have you done specifically with this grace?

One possible reading of this parable, given its context of polemic between Jesus and the Pharisees and the way in which Jesus has charged the Pharisees with hypocrisy in various ways, is to see the Pharisees (and the religious establishment in general) as figured in the person of the third slave. That is, the grace which has been given them has yielded nothing – recall the charge Jesus makes that the Pharisees have received and rightly taught the law given to Moses, but have not themselves yielded the appropriate fruit of the grace in the gift of the law – humility and servanthood, as distinct from the self-exaltation which he names in their practice of righteousness (Matthew 23.1-12). The Pharisees’ response to God’s grace is contrasted in Matthew’s gospel with the response of others to grace – the meek, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (see Matthew 5.1-13). Those who would seem to be outside the reach of God have, because of that distance, received a greater abundance of grace and, Jesus suggests, have yielded even more grace in their now richly graced lives. This is in contrast to those who already had ‘enough’ of the grace of God and yet who have done nothing with it. They have not understood what they have been given and so neither recognise the gift of God or what it should yield when they receive it.

Now, if we don’t read these parables only as moral encouragement, we also don’t read them as history lessons. The story of Jesus and the Pharisees, and Jesus’ charges against the Pharisees, are only important if their story is also *our* story. As Gentiles, we are the first two slaves, given a particular abundance of grace, which yielded the further grace we see as the rise of the church with its gospel of God’s love for all. But, as now the religious establishment, *we* are also the third slave, prone to self-satisfaction, prone to mistake what is simply *given* as in fact a *right*, prone to mistake our election as God’s people as a sign of our specialness or righteousness.

It is to these dangers that the parable speaks: the talent you have is the grace which is Jesus Christ. In what way is that grace yielding grace in your lives? In what ways do we model the forgiveness which we claim is ours in Christ? In what ways is the abundance which is God's for us reflected in our relationships with each other? These are rather abstract questions, but they will soon become very concrete for us here at Mark the Evangelist as we begin to ask about our property and our mission: what precisely *have* we been given, what its value is, and what might we be able to do with that? To think about these things as 'grace to become yet more grace' might free us up to imagine even greater possibilities than might otherwise have been the case.

We return here, in a sense, to the moral question, yet now it is not simply about doing the right thing but about the share we have in God's work of grace. For we do not gather for worship to declare that we are good, but to be 'made' good by the gift of God's grace, and then to take up a share in that work of making good in God's 'absence'. The proof of our right standing before God is not moral righteousness but that special kind of righteousness which comes with being adopted as the children of God, and then growing into our own particular God-likeness. This righteousness is not earned, it is given, and it is not then a possession but a thing to be used, a thing to affect the world, a thing to change relationships.

To receive grace is to *become grace-full* – to become 'gracing' towards others; we might recall here the parable of the unforgiving servant – himself being forgiven an enormous debt but unable to forgive a friend a very small amount (Matthew 18.21-35). The grace of God is not ours if it does not *make* us the grace of God, make us those who do what God does, in such a way that it would be as if God were *not* 'absent' at all, as the parable of the master who goes abroad suggests.

What might the world – or even the just the church itself – be like if it did not think to wonder at the absence of God because God's people were sufficient grace that God's absence was not noted?

To be the people of God is to do as God does, to become a means of grace to each other and to the world around us. This is the proof (or the test) of our righteousness: whether or not it yields righteousness in others, the very thing God has given us.

By the grace of God, may we be found to pass that test in the day of reckoning, that the words 'well done, good and faithful servant' may be heard by *our* ears, and we may enter into the joy of God.
