

The Lord be with you:

and also with you.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

as we gather we must recall the promises and warnings given to us in the Scriptures.

Let us therefore examine ourselves and repent of our sins.

Father God, we confess that we often take the gifts of your creation for granted, and use them chiefly to further our own interests:

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Saviour Christ, we confess that we often give in to the selfish desires of our hearts, and the uncaring ways of the world.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Holy Spirit, we confess that we often close our minds to your influence, and fail to bear good fruits in our lives.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Absolution May God our Father forgive us our sins,
and bring us to the fellowship of his table with his saints for ever. **Amen.**

1Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

This is the word of the Lord;

Thanks be to God.

Matthew 25:14-30 [The Parable of the Talents]

'It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." 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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." 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? 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. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Is this the most unfair parable ever? To me it is structured to deliberately upset us: to deliberately cause us to think about what it means to be a Christian: a follower of this Jesus Christ.

First of all, let us understand what a talent means in the Bible. In the recent parable of the workers in the Vineyard, one denarius was a fair day's wage. If we multiply a fair day's wage by a whole lifetime's work – we get the value of a talent.

In other words, in this parable the servants are given a great deal of money. And what is it that they are told to do with these talents? Their work is to share the good news of the gospel.

And this discipleship instruction uses aggressive words – the one who received five talents *went off at once: he traded* with his talents: the slave with two talents *made* two more talents. They all say that activity, not passivity is the mode of Christian hope.

Waiting for the Lord is not for Matthew a fact of religious inwardness or of a great fervour or even of prayer; it is an ACTIVE engagement that activates the believer to risky initiatives. Discipleship is not meant to be *comfortable*! And it all comes about because of the gift we have been given: the Christian hope. We call it “grace”. So, the response that motivates us as Christians is to work for the kingdom.

The slave who is given 5 talents returns with five more talents. And this grace that he is given *is open to all*. Matthew's Gospel is as deeply concerned that Christians be won to Christianity as it is that non-Christians become Christians. The winning with talents, then, is also the winning of other men and women into discipleship, or back into discipleship. Entrepreneurial business comes out well in this Parable of Talents. Contrast the outgoing verbs of the first two slaves with the recessive, timid verbs of the third slave. He *went off*; he *dug a hole*; he *hid his master's money instead of going to work*, instead of winning another talent. As an aside, it is quite intriguing to think that the parable might have been a critical side glance at the Qumran community that at that time *went away* - into isolation in the desert, which dug caves for its community and so hid itself and its gifts from the world. Is even Israel itself targeted, to whom so much had been entrusted but who had not made use of its trust – its talents? Is Matthew really quite angry?

Could “*Went away*” indicate Pharisaic separatism? Could “*dug a hole in the ground*” in Matthew's phrase be their preoccupation with living safe lives, with a puritanical desire to avoid contamination with sinners? The most obvious instinct in this slave with the one talent who “*digs in*” is the desire to play it safe and avoid the dangers of mixing in the world. But according to rabbinic law, burying money was, in fact, the safest course, avoiding the risk to their security and their responsibility for loss.

But “safe” as this conduct may be, there is a lack of adventure in it - an unwillingness to take risks. A pre-occupation with one's own security, which Jesus clearly dislikes.

This piety is too unworldly, too withdrawn, too removed from the secular to please the earthly Jesus who, remember, sends his disciples *into the world* to disciple it, who puts salt into the meat to season it; who brings light into the room to give light to all who are in it. Talents mean Mission. That for me is the meat of this parable.

And mission has no geography to it. It can happen anywhere. To anyone. Withdrawing from people of whom we disapprove is the equivalent of digging a hole in the ground and hiding our talent.

We all have talents – St. Paul lists the variety of our gifts. The point of this parable is that we really must use them. We are even told that “investing our talent with the bankers” is better than nothing, as on the master's return he would have at least received interest.

Which brings me, in this quite dense parable, to the return “*after a long time*” of the master. To settle accounts. The Second Coming: that has worried so many people, which has resulted in more separation: separation from the world.

We confess in the Creed that “He shall come to judge the living and the dead”.

The Return of the Master brings this accounting. It could be immediate or delayed, so we should make provision as if it might be immediate. In this gospel nobody, not even the historical Jesus, knows when the Return will be.

The life of faith lives between grace and judgement. Paul stresses the former without neglecting the latter; Matthew stresses the latter without neglecting the former. The slave might not have, perhaps, boasted that he had made five more talents. Perhaps he should have modestly said, “Look what *you* have done *through* me”. Luke’s version of this parable is more grace-centred: “Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds.”

Jesus teaches that not all who *think* they are Christians go to heaven. In this parable, timidity in the face of grace is not rewarded. Yet I think it is implied that the slave expected to be commended for his caution. One gets the impression of a bad conscience wrapping itself in “good” theology: everyone knows that money is given to be *used*, not hidden, but this slave was able to talk himself, and he hoped, his Lord, into thinking that true faith can actually cause people to be careful about daring to do anything risky.

As I’ve said before, Christians are expected to USE IT or LOSE IT. That, once they have been given the grace to believe in the richness of God’s love, we need to do something with it. Today’s parable, then, should persuade us to change what we mean about our Christian faith. God loves us, and he wants us to be a force for good in this world. He wants us to risk; to dare to try to bring Christians AND outsiders into his fold. He wants us to be evangelists.

And at some indeterminate time, we know that He will return: to separate the wheat from the chaff; to judge how we have won people for the Lord. NOT how well we have conserved the grace of our faith. So, let us dare a bit; let us live what we believe!

Amen.

The Apostles’ Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Amen.

Intercessions, beginning with the Collect of the 2nd Sunday before Advent

Heavenly Father,

Whose blessed Son was revealed to destroy the works of the devil and to make us the children of God and heirs of eternal life: Grant that we, having this hope, may purify ourselves even as he is pure; that when he shall appear in power and great glory, we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom, where he is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Let us pray that the gifts of God may be rightly used. Bless the church with generosity and care for all. Give grace to your people so to use all that has been entrusted to them that they may bring new hope to many and show forth the glory of God. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer

Bring to a world where dealing is often hard and competitive the spirit of compassion, so that those who gain much may share more generously. Give wisdom to the rich to know that all wealth is a gift of God.

hear our prayer

Help us to value more gratefully the gifts we have been given, to develop and to use them for the good of others. Guide with wisdom those who are responsible for the finances of this community.

hear our prayer

Have mercy on those who bear the heavy crosses of sickness or poverty, of loneliness or bereavement, especially at this anxious time of the Coronavirus. Bless and relieve all who are in hospital, those who are isolating or in ICU suffering with the Virus. Be with those whose lives have been impacted in whatever way due to the uncertainty of the present time.

hear our prayer

We pray for those who, having laid aside their burdens, have seen the Son of Man in his glory as Son of God, and are with him for ever. Give us grace so to follow his cross in this world that we too may at last enter into eternal life. ***hear our prayer***

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever, Amen.

Dismissal:

In darkness and in light,
in trouble and in joy,
help us, heavenly father,
to trust your love,
to serve your purpose,
and to praise your name
and the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be with you and remain with you always.

Amen.