**13th November 2011**

**Matthew 25:14-30 - "The Parable of the Talents"**

During the dark days of World War II, England had a great deal of difficulty keeping men in the coal mines. It was a thankless kind of job, totally lacking in any glory. Most chose to join the various military services. They desired something that could give them more social acceptance and recognition. Something was needed to motivate these men in the work that they were doing so that they would remain in the mines.

With this in mind, Winston Churchill delivered a speech one day to thousands of coal miners, stressing to them the importance of their role in the war effort. He did this by painting for them a mental picture. He told them to picture the grand parade that would take place when VE Day came. First, he said, would come the sailors of the British Navy, the ones who had upheld the grand tradition of Trafalgar and the defeat of the Armada. Next in the parade, he said, would come the pilots of the Royal Air Force. They were the ones who, more than any other, had saved England from the dreaded German Luftwaffe. Next in the parade would come the Army, the ones that had stood tall at the crises of Dunkirk.

Last of all, he said, would come a long line of sweat-stained, soot-streaked men in minor's caps. And someone, he said, would cry from the crowd, "And where were you during the critical days of the struggle?" And then from ten thousand throats would come "We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal."

We are told that there were tears in the eyes of many of those soot laden and weathered faced coal miners. They had been given a sense of their own self worth by the man at the top. Service does not always come with big fancy ribbons. And I think it is forever true, that humble acts of service provide us with the deepest sense of joy and the most fulfilling satisfaction.

In our scripture text today Jesus tells a story about service. He said there was a wealthy landowner who was preparing for a long journey. He called his three servants and divided his money between them, each according to their ability. When we hear the word, talent, today, we think of a special ability, such as musical talent. That meaning came into the English language through this parable and is derived from it. In Jesus' day, however, a talent was a measure of weight -- and later of money. It may have had nothing to do with abilities To one servant he gave five talents, meaning a sum of money, to a second two, and to a third one.

Why is life like that? I don't know. We are all equal in the eyes of God. In an election our votes are all equal. But when it comes to our abilities, we are as different as different can be. God simply did not make us all the same. There are some people who can handle five talents; there are some who can handle only one. There are some persons who have great intellectual capabilities, and some who do not. There are some who have the ability to project and articulate their thoughts, and there are some who cannot. There are some who have physical prowess and attractive looks, and there are some who do not.

We cannot all be brain surgeons. The Disneyfication of our culture, dream a dream, become whatever you wish for, reach for the stars, tries on one level to encourage people to be the best they can be and aspire for greatness. But on another level it leads to despair and disillusionment. We can’t all be brain surgeons, concert pianists, premier league footballers, X Factor singers or whatever other dreams school children have. Some one has got to go down the mine.

Our teachers need our prayers and support as they try to help our young people come to a realistic assessment of the talents they have and where they can best be used. Inevitably some young people will feel they have little value to society and that their future looks bleak. One of our local police officers was taking an assembly at Rednock School this week and told the young people that the ambulance service is concerned at the number of call outs they have to make to young people who are drunk and disorderly in our town. It is the highest rate in the county. This is 14 to 16 year olds getting drunk. One can speculate about the reasons – but turning to alcohol has always been traditionally seen as escapism – drinking the pain away. More than ever, in our bankrupt society, Church of Christ, we need to pray and support young people, teachers, parents, youth workers. More than ever we need to offer our Christian hope. And that is spelt out in this parable of Jesus.

**First of all we all have something to offer**.
The important thing to remember is that each servant was given something. No one was left idle. You may not be a five-talent person, but you have some talent. We all do. And you know something. I think that there are a whole lot more one and two talent people in this world than there are five talent people. Oh, there are some people who seem to have it all. I won't deny that. But most of us are just one or two talent servants. Maybe those talents are unspectacular talents – humble service. Where would we be without those who went down the mines?

We all have something to offer. Even when life takes away our talents we will still have something to offer. I heard about an old lady who lived her life for others. When it became necessary for her, in her nineties, to go into a nursing home, she welcomed the opportunity. She said, 'There might be some people there who don't know the Lord and I can read the Bible to them'."

**Secondly, all that we have is not our own, it belongs to the master.**

Our secular society is still spiritually seeking. The question who am I and what am I here for is still the essential question. I read the other day part of the speech that Richard Dannatt, the former chief of the general staff of the army gave this week on the need for the spiritual dimension not only for the military but for everyone. He described the account of a British soldier who had just shot his first enemy fighter in Afghanistan in 2006. He wrote how afterwards he sat down and thought about the incidence and how he had done his job and shot the enemy, the Taliban and felt quite chuffed about it. But then he thought the geezer’s another human being.. but it was either him or me. The he wrote ‘I think people get, like you know, religious then as well. You’re thinking well, in the bigger picture, if there is like a Geezer up there and a Geezer downstairs, what does that mean to me now that I’ve just shot someone? Is that me done for? Am I going to hell or what? And all of that went through me mind that night, for hour after hour after hour.’ Dannatt, who is a committed Christian remarked that these are young people out there asking those spiritual questions.

Some people believe in Christianity as a bit like a heavenly examination. One day God sets the final exam and sees who passes and who fails. At first sight this parable may simply reinforce that impression. But parables don’t tell you the whole picture of God the maker and lover of the world. The whole ministry of Jesus should make us protest against such a view of Christianity. Jesus declared he had come to call, not the righteous but the sinners and to seek and save the lost and warned the religious types against thinking Christianity was about rules to be kept.

This parable comes near the end of the story of the gospel when the Son of man came to give his life as a ransom for many. When Jesus speaks about being thrown into the darkness outside where there is weeping and the gnashing of teeth, we must never forget that he himself was on the way into the darkness, where even he would sense himself abandoned by God and worthless. We are not our own we are bought with a price – thank God we are His, valued and precious in His sight – greater love hath no ne than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

You may have been given five talents. Don’t be arrogant and think you are better than the rest. Live in humble gratefulness to God – he has entrusted you with these talents for his service and the good of his world. God is taking a risk – but values you so much he’ll take it with you. You serve a purpose bigger than the enlargement of your own kingdom. The more our political leaders appeal to people’s self interest, the more we are destined for the breakdown of our society. We are not our own. We depend on each other and ultimately we depend on God, to whom we belong.

The wartime generation knew that. They depended on each other and worked for each other.

**Thirdly, we always have an opportunity to serve the master so long as we can overcome our fear or lethargy.**

Unemployment may be on the rise – this is tragic and deeply concerning. We are making good progress to establish a Food bank which will be a practical response from the local churches to people experiencing financial hardship. It will need further volunteers to help – and if you feel you can help see me. Sadly we can’t pay you – it will be voluntary work. There is always work to be done for the Lord – there is always employment in the church – sadly it is not always paid. But gifts can be used and a difference can be made.

The landowner in this parable, went on his journey. When he returned he called together his three servants and asked them to give an account. It seems that the five talent man had invested his talent and was able to return an additional five talents, a 100% return. So, too the two talent man doubles his money. Well done good and faithful servant.”

An anonymous writer has said, "My small son and I were taking a walk. In the far corner of the field we found a small patch of beautiful and fragrant flowers. They were in the middle of weeds, almost completely hidden and unnoticed, yet these flowers were blooming in full beauty and we sensed their fresh fragrance. All of us have met persons unnoticed by many, but who in the middle of struggle and unlikely surroundings far from the centre of attention live lives of beauty and fragrance. And living lives which seemed obscure they faithfully fulfilled God's calling for them. God's question on the last day will not be, 'How much were you noticed?' or even 'How much did you do?' Rather, his question will be, 'Were you faithful in fulfilling your calling where I placed you?' God gives us the seeds, we produce the fruit.

But what about the one talent man? He stepped forward and said: Sir, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow. So he returned that which he had originally been given him. The landowner, incensed, uses words such as “slothful” and “wicked.” Angrily he took the talent back and gave it to the servant who now had ten.

Well, it is obvious that the star, or we might say the villain, of the story is the one talent man. The salient question is: why did he choose to do nothing with the one talent that had been given to him? We are not really given the answer. We are left to speculate. Is his inaction due to the fear of failure? Is his inaction because of the ‘What if” game? Is he thinking ‘Will one little talent make a difference – so why bother?’

One of the messages of this parable is that being taken up in Christ’s service involves more than playing it safe and doing little or nothing. It demands the kind of devoted and risky service to Christ’s kingdom that produces results.

Fred Craddock has said:

 “The major themes of the Christian faith - caring, giving, witnessing, trusting, loving, hoping - cannot be understood or lived without risk."

We had a meeting this week of representatives of all the *United Reformed Churches in the Gloucestershire Area. A Synod Officer was there too. I was able to share with them about the risks we have taken – using a grant from our Synod to part fund a part time youth worker, risking the newly refurbished church to host a family cafe and I was proud to be the minster of a church that was willing to change and risk. Like the one talent man who dug a hole and buried his talent, if you dig a hole and try to preserve what you have – you end up losing it. The world is changing and if you don’t respond you end up digging a hole for yourself and you lose life.*

A captain of a ship called the crew together. Some of the old crew members who had jumped ship had returned because they heard and saw what was happening. And other members were new, bringing with them great excitement and love for the sea. “It is time that we made plans to leave this harbor." The crew looked around at each other. The captain, knowing that some of them were fearful, said, "This ship was not made for the safety of the harbor but for the horizon," and he pointed to it. "But you are the crew. You must decide. Will it be the harbor or the horizon?"

"A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are for." We might add that Pearl Harbour which brought the Americans into the war and which had its 70th anniversary next month, proved that ships in harbour are not really safe after all

The third servant was afraid of his master. The parable means to transform our imagination about who God is. If we remain trapped in imagining God as a fearsome God of vengeance, then we end up judged according to our own imaginations. But if we can imagine a gracious God, as the first two servants do, then both our actions and the consequences of our actions yield gracious results.

Actually, the third slave acted as he was probably taught. In first century AD/ Jewish culture taught that if one was entrusted with something of great value, one should bury it in the ground for safekeeping.

Some scholars, notably William Herzog, suggest that the third servant is a hero. This servant stood up to a demanding boss who encouraged his employees to increase his wealth and their own bank accounts by making loans or investments that charged exorbitant interest rates. Burying the funds kept them from being used for such corrupt purposes. By refusing to take action that would have oppressed others and shaming the business practices of the owner, the third servant embraces God’s reign of justice and equity.

Is the behaviour of the master in the parable something that God would commend, let alone imitate? Is this kind of behaviour what Jesus expects of God's people? I hope not!

Parables are deliberately open to many interpretations – that is how the Spirit works – those who have ears to hear listen for what the spirit is saying. If we don't read Christ or God as the master anywhere in this parable then we could see this simply as Jesus making a comment on standard human economics for which, "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer" (a defensible interpretation of the master's comment in verse 29). Then kingdom of heaven will be found with those who suffer from such economics. If we "follow Jesus," that's where we will find him, namely, with those left out when the rich get richer. Jesus' life began in a barn, grew up in the poverty of Nazareth, spent a ministry among the poor and outcast, and finally let himself be handed over into the hands of the richest and most powerful of his nation to be judged as one completely on the outside, a godforsaken, blaspheming criminal.

**Final point of hope is that God looks at the big picture.**

It is interesting to note that in the 25th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel there are three parables told in a row: The Parable of the Bridesmaid, The Parable of the Sheep and Goats, and the Parable of the Talents. Essentially the same phrase is used in each: after a long time. The bridegroom comes after a long time. The landowner returns after a long time. The judgment comes after a long time. Perhaps this is Matthews’s way of saying to us: Our master may be delayed in his return, but, in the meanwhile, what are you doing with the talent that has been entrusted to you. If things aren’t working out for you now – don’t fret –it’s a long haul. You shouldn’t judge a football team after only a few games. It’s the table at the end of the season that counts.

 So many people I have come across who didn’t do well at school but found themselves later in life. So many people look back on their lives and remember how they coped with hardship, suffering depression, breakups of relationship, but they came through. These things will pass. We may have had our Dunkirks, but the cross of Christ is our D-Day – victory will be ours, but we may have to be patient until VE Day finally comes. It’s a long journey – keep going, keep going in faith and hope – God is with you.

We all have something to offer.

We are not our own

Overcome your fear and serve the master

Look to the long term.