

BIBLICAL RESOURCES

Prov 31:10-13, 19-20; Ps 128 (127); 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6; Mt 25:14-20

The Parable of the Talents

Matt 25:14 “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. 19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 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.’ 21 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.’ 22 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.’ 23 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.’ 24 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. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29 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. 30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The inspiration is in Mark:

It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. (Mark 13:34)

There is also a version in Luke, with a different atmosphere and conclusion, very striking in this Gospel, which is such a peaceful document. See Luke 19:24-27.

He said to the bystanders, ‘Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds.’ (And they said to him, ‘Lord, he has ten pounds!’) ‘I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.’ (Luke 19:24-27)

Matthew too has expressed the text in his own typical vocabulary to serve his own teaching purpose.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

In the Wisdom books of the Bible, making use of your abilities is stressed, as we can see from today’s

Thought for the day

What does God desire of us? This simple question is perhaps not asked frequently enough! It can be made quite personal: what does God want of me, from me? In the end, the answer has to be—in the words of the song—“all that I am,” precisely because God loves *all that I am*. This will mean allowing ourselves to be loved. It will also mean responding with my whole self, including all the gifts of body, mind and soul that God has bestowed upon me. In the end, God does hope that we may be and become our true selves. Nothing less is adequate to God’s own love of us.

Prayer

We are truly grateful to you, God our creator and redeemer, for your many gifts. We ask you help that we may use all you have given us for your glory and for the good of our neighbour.

first reading. It may well be that the “woman” in question stands for Lady Wisdom who “complements” each human being.

KIND OF WRITING

There are several kinds of parables in the NT: “original” parables which are often disorienting and later more didactic or incipiently allegorical parables. Our text belongs to this second category, which is more “teaching” and in general the meaning is plain. It is good to bear in mind that a single parable will never give us all we need to keep in mind, but only one or two aspects.

Thus certain questions such as the harshness of the boss are, perhaps, not relevant, because the bottom line here is that there are some things which only each of us can do for him or herself!!

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) First, studies of Q (the earliest layer of the Synoptic tradition) have shown that it is dominated by wisdom forms of speech: beatitudes, parables, proverbs/aphorisms, and nature sayings. Second, there has been intensive research on the forms themselves (especially parables and aphorisms) and their particular function in the message of Jesus.

At its heart is an alternative image of reality, an alternative path, and an alternative paradigm for behaviour.

(ii) This parable is found in a parable section in Matthew which deals with the end of time. The context is a complex of themes, which helps us not to read the parable in isolation. (See box below.)

ST PAUL

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. (1 Thess 5:4-9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 14 Temporary absence, which happened with the rulers in Palestine.

Verse 15 A talent is an unusually large some of money—about fifteen years wages or 6,000 drachmas. It was never minted as a coin.

Verse 16 This is risk-taking, which is recommended for the gospel!!

Verse 17 ditto!

Verse 18 This person takes no risks.

Verse 19 The long delay has an allegorical meaning, that is the delayed second coming of Christ.

Verse 20 A positive result.

Verse 21 Unreserved praise, which is unusual in the Bible.

Verse 22 The same again.

Verse 23 That is., ditto for you!

Verse 24 The projection on to the master is an avoidance of responsibility.

Verse 25 The plain return is exactly what God does *not* want of us.

Verse 26 Unreserved condemnation.

Verse 17 Such a very passive activity might not seem so secure these days!!

Verse 28 Judgement is immediate.

Verse 29 A paradoxical teaching at the service of the main message.

Verse 20 “Outer darkness” and “grinding of teeth” are typical expressions of Matthew.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Jesus was angry at the way the Jewish leaders treated God’s gift of revelation to his people. They had buried it when it was intended to grow and be life-giving to all. The resources of this earth are God’s gift to us. Perhaps, like Jesus, you have a passion to see a fairer distribution of the goods of this world.

2. One of the ways the leaders had buried God’s gift was by putting strict observance of a multiplicity of rules at the centre of religious practice rather than a deep faith and trust in the forgiving love of God. What part have rules played for you in your life? Have they been life-giving?

3. Sometimes we can get a lesson on what is truly important in life from the example of people who are living in circumstances that on the surface are unorthodox, unconventional, and sometimes irregular. What lessons have you learned from such witness?

4. On the level of our own personal life, faith is not given to us to be locked away, but to be “traded” with. We trade with it when we believe in its value, trust it, and use it, bringing it into the experiences we have in daily life. Can you recall times when relying on your faith has brought you rewards?

5. Likewise with our own personal gifts and talents. We can fall into the trap of seeing these as our personal possession so that we can do with them as we like, rather than share them as gifts so that they can be multiplied. What is your experience of hoarding or sharing your own gifts? When did you feel most alive?

6. The master in the story is also someone we can celebrate. He is the kind of person who does not cling to power. He entrusts his property (his cause) to others. Perhaps you have known leaders who have done this? Have you done it yourself? As parents have you entrusted the lives of your children to them so that they can find life to the full by taking responsibility for their own lives?

PRAYER

O God, from whose own abundance, all gifts and skills are lavishly bestowed, encourage us to use our talents as generously as you have allotted them, so that, being faithful to your purpose, we may become sharers in your glory.

We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Verses	Contents	Source
24: 1-44	following Mk 13, + additions and changes	Mk/Q/M
24: 45-25:30	parables of delay (Steward, Virgins, Talents)	Q/M/Q
25: 31-46	parable of the Last Judgement	M

a) The fig tree as a parable of the coming of the Son of Man
b) As in the days of Noah
c) As when a burglar comes
d) As with a faithful servant when his master returns
e) As with bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom
f) As with talents given to servants to work with
g) As with sheep and goats separated by the shepherd

Dame Wisdom at work

- Prov 31:10 A capable wife who can find?
 She is far more precious than jewels.
- 11 The heart of her husband trusts in her,
 and he will have no lack of gain.
- 12 She does him good, and not harm,
 all the days of her life.
- 13 She seeks wool and flax,
 and works with willing hands.
- 14 *She is like the ships of the merchant,
 she brings her food from far away.*
- 15 *She rises while it is still night
 and provides food for her household
 and tasks for her servant girls.*
- 16 *She considers a field and buys it;
 with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.*
- 17 *She girds herself with strength,
 and makes her arms strong*
- 18 *She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
 Her lamp does not go out at night.*
- 19 She puts her hands to the distaff,
 and her hands hold the spindle.
- 20 She opens her hand to the poor,
 and reaches out her hands to the needy.
- 21 *She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
 for all her household are clothed in crimson.*
- 22 *She makes herself coverings;
 her clothing is fine linen and purple.*
- 23 *Her husband is known in the city gates,
 taking his seat among the elders of the land.*
- 24 *She makes linen garments and sells them;
 she supplies the merchant with sashes.*
- 25 *Strength and dignity are her clothing,
 and she laughs at the time to come.*
- 26 *She opens her mouth with wisdom,
 and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*
- 27 *She looks well to the ways of her household,
 and does not eat the bread of idleness.*
- 28 *Her children rise up and call her happy;
 her husband too, and he praises her:*
- 29 *“Many women have done excellently,
 but you surpass them all.”*
- 30 Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
 but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
- 31 Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
 and let her works praise her in the city gates.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This remarkable poem brings the book of Proverbs to a resounding conclusion, echoing chapters 1-9. No doubt the reading will evoke differing reactions, but for its time and place, it is forward looking.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Proverbs, as it now stands, is a collection of collections, reflecting different periods and

different social contexts, including the wider Middle East. Our poem has the feeling of developed tractate wisdom and it is some distance from the pithy expressions of popular wisdom.

KIND OF WRITING

This is a poem, which takes us through the outstanding features of this very capable woman. She is active in several areas of business; she never rests, not even at home;



and all along she is not only well-dressed but in herself wise when she speaks. The parallelism of Hebrew poetry is present, but not in any slavish way.

Technically, this is an acrostic poem, that is each verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. For an attempt replicate an acrostic layout in translation, see Psalm 25 in the New Jerusalem Bible.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Emerging from a patriarchal society, the wisdom books of the bible can be disturbingly negative about women, even misogynistic. It is all the more notable then that we find this untrammelled praise of a very independent and engaging woman.

The wide context of the wisdom books is manifold: demotic wisdom, educated court officials, the status of the king, wisdom currents from Egypt and Mesopotamia in general. There too we find wisdom (*hokmah*, *sophia* or in Egypt, *ma'at*) as a kind of divine principle in all that is.

Within the biblical tradition, there is a specific evolution in the personification of wisdom as a woman. Just as a man is made whole by the companionship of a woman, likes the human is completed by wisdom (from God, ultimately). The key texts are these: Job 28; Proverbs 1, 8 and 9; Baruch 3:9-4:4; Sir 24; Wis 7:7-9:18. The extent of the personification is debated and

varied. It does do within Judaism what all religions must eventually face: negotiating the beyond of God (transcendence) and the nearness of God (immanence).

Our text has roots in popular demotic wisdom but really reflects the elevated view of the educated sages. Are we meant to think of an actual person here, reading realistically? Or are we meant to think of *Lady Wisdom*, the ideal complement for every human being, reading symbolically? Both have been argued. Lady Wisdom is also a wife, a home builder and a provider.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 128 (127) takes up the picture of family life implied in the reading from Proverbs but it generalises the teaching: *O blessed are those who fear the Lord.*

THE GOSPEL LINK

There is no question but this woman is using her talents. The list of her activities is both exhaustive and exhausting!

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 10 The question is ambiguous. Is she impossible or merely difficult to find? Neither, according to Proverbs! It is by the grace of God. The contrast with precious stones is a commonplace (see Job 28, for example).

Verses 11-12 The husband does get a look-in but always as a beneficiary. He has a walk-on part at the end to praise this marvellous woman.

Verse 13 She is not only a business woman but a worker in her own right. The mention of wool and flax serve to anticipate how she looks after her household.

Verses 19-20 The two verses belong together, not only because of the word “hands” throughout, but also because the layout is chiasmic, that is abb¹a¹. Successful home industry creates disposable income, allowing for generosity to the poor.

Verse 30 In biblical idiom, the contrast is not so much *either/or* but *both/and* with a real emphasis on qualities over appearances. This verse provides a didactic observation,

in case we should miss it.

Verse 31 This is a further comment from an observer. It takes up setting of the gates from v. 29 and reminds us the the public esteem for this woman.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

Serene Light, shining in the ground of my being, draw me to Yourself! Draw me past the snares of the senses, out of the mazes of the mind, Free me from symbols, from words, that I may discover the Signified, the Word Unspoken, in the darkness that veils the ground of my being, (A prayer of F.C. Happold)

PRAYER

O God of our ancestors and Lord of mercy, who have made all things by your word, and by your wisdom have formed humankind to have dominion over the creatures you have made, and rule the world in holiness and righteousness, and pronounce judgment in uprightness of soul, give us the wisdom that sits by your throne, and do not reject us from among your servants. For we are your servants, the children of your servants, weak and short-lived, with little understanding of judgment and laws; for even one who is perfect among human beings will be regarded as nothing without the wisdom that comes from you.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading
Prov 31:10-13, 19-20

You may find this picture of a woman liberating or irritating! There is no doubt that she is making use of her time and talents.

Second reading
1 Thessalonians 5:1-6

Early Christians did wonder when the end would be. Paul doesn't know *when* but he does know *how* to live in preparation. No sleepwalking through life!

Gospel
Mt 25:14-20

A talent was a measure of weight and then a coin. Our word “talent” helps us to enter into the parable.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

For these last two weeks of the church's year, we read from the New Testament Apocalypse. It make a great conclusion to the Bible, which began in a garden, Eden, and ends in city, the New Jerusalem. It synthesises a great deal of the New Testament, even in its literary form which brings together apocalypse, letter, liturgy and prophecy. For all its complexity, it is responding to the question: why do good people suffer?

Monday 17 Nov St Elizabeth
Apocalypse 1:1-4; 2:1-5

The opening words of this reading promise us happiness—if we listen! The close letter is call to repentance, never too late!

Tuesday 18 November
Apocalypse 3:1-6, 14-22

The gospel communities in Sardis and Laodicea give the impression being alive...but the reality is otherwise. This wake-up call is for us too.

Wednesday 19 November
Apocalypse 4:1-11

A worship scene opens up for us: rich in symbol and mysterious. At the centre we hear words we use at every mass; at the end, we confess God, the creator of all that is.

Thursday 20 November
Apocalypse 5:1-10

The sealed scroll contains the plan of God for the course of history. Who can open it? The lamb—Jesus—can open it, because of his cross and resurrection.

Fri 21 Nov Presentation of the BVM
Apocalypse 10:8-11

This puzzling scene—an echo of Ezekiel—tell us that the writer had a message both bitter and sweet. Sweet to those on the side of God; bitter to those on “the other side.”

Saturday 22 November St Cecilia
Apocalypse 11:4-12

Our reading today is certainly mysterious. It echoes stories of Elijah and Elisha. The prophets did and will suffer—but God, in whose hands they are, will raise the up.