

Matthew 25: 14-30; 1Thessalonians 5: 1-11

I have a feeling that this story was a favourite of Jesus' when he was talking about the kingdom of heaven – there's a similar but more colourful version of it in Luke's gospel. However, its full meaning is far from clear and practically every commentator I looked at had a different take on it.

I don't think the story makes sense unless we assume that the slave owner represents Jesus. Funny terminology for the 21st century I know but St Paul for instance describes himself as a 'slave of Christ'. And this slave owner is going on a journey. I'm going to presume that by this story Jesus is getting his followers to imagine how it will be in the time between him returning to his Father and coming back to earth.

In Matthew's telling, Jesus has just told the story of 'the ten bridesmaids' to demonstrate how his followers must keep themselves ready because no-one knows when that come back will be.

The master in the story entrusts his property to these three slaves, ridiculously large amounts of money by all accounts. And yet, I would like to suggest this story is not really about how we should manage our money, it's not even about how industrious we should be to improve ourselves.

When the master returns we are told that he rewards the first two slaves for their faithfulness. This is a story about being faithful to Jesus in his absence, continuing the good practices that he taught about, sharing the good news, loving our neighbour in His name.

I would like to consider the third slave a little more. In spite of being part of the master's household he does not seem to know his master very well. He says he is a harsh man, a plunderer of other people's property and that he was afraid of him. The master calls him out on this and says: **'but in that case you should have put the money in a bank because such a man would have been happy to have had the interest the money would have earned.'** (Paying and receiving interest was forbidden by Jewish law.)

To me, this slave represents the follower of Christ who has not understood that God is a God of love, a God of grace and forgiveness, a God who is generous to a fault, who is prepared to entrust us with all of his creation. This slave represents those whose understanding of God is that he is a god who punishes, who wreaks vengeance, who keeps a tally of mistakes. And this slave, although entrusted with much, has not really given thought to what this means, has not learned from the 'faithful' pair what the master had intended, has not properly reflected on who his master is, but instead has buried his head in the ground with the treasure he has been given and led a miserable life fearful of the master's return.

The story ends with this slave having to hand back the treasure and being sent away, when he will weep and gnash his teeth.

Jesus's stories often come to a close without the end being worked out. We don't need to assume that this slave remains in the doldrums. The master I know, and his faithful servants, would reach out to draw him back into the fold.

So I call on you to remember and consider the great treasure that you have been entrusted with by God, and because you have much, work out how to honour that by living faithfully in the daily decisions and actions of your life so that the world will be ready for that unknown day when Jesus will return.

If the slave that you most identify with at the moment is the third slave, can I encourage you to wonder whether you might be missing out on a more glorious relationship with God and Jesus than one that leaves you feeling fearful and to explore this possibility perhaps with the assistance of one of our ministry team.

St Paul offered these words to the Thessalonians:

'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.'

Thanks be to God,

Amen