

SERMON AT ST PAUL'S: 33<sup>rd</sup> SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME  
2020

There is some dispute about the value of a talent.

It was certainly a lot of money, and one source states that it was equivalent to 34.2 kilograms of gold or silver.

So all the servants in (they are slaves in the Greek) the story Jesus told received a great deal of money, a fortune in fact.

Even the servant who received only one talent.

The story is often taken as an encouragement to Christians to make the most of their gifts.

Hence there is the custom in some churches of giving members of the congregation a sum of money in the hope that they will go away and make a comparable sum for church funds.

I am not sure how this works in practice, but I expect that many would just put their hands in their pockets and turn up with double the amount they were given.

Whether or not the practice is a good thing is moot, but the depths of meaning in the story far exceed its use as an encouragement of financial enterprise in the service of the Church.

The master's trust goes beyond the bounds of reason as he relies on his servants' responsibility in dealing with such large sums of money when he went abroad, *for a long time*.

Thoughts of thrift and enterprise are inevitable as we think of comparisons with the modern world, of wise investment, speculation, capital growth, and maybe secret bank accounts.

Fair enough, but the story goes beyond reason.

The sums involved are massive, the master's trust unfathomed.

When he returns he rewards the successful servants with great responsibility and a share in his happiness.

Their master's trust has produced great fruits.

The third servant, reporting to the master, appears to deny his generosity and trust.

He accuses him of being a hard man *reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.*

He is ruled by fear, seeing the master as more interested in punishment than love.

Although he returns the master's capital intact, he is rebuked.

The money is taken from him and given to the man who made the most.

He is thrown into outer darkness.

The connection between this story and the God of Jesus, with Jesus himself, is inescapable.

God's generosity exceeds all reasonable bounds.

He gives to us without measure: the early Christians would inevitably have thought of the gifts received in baptism as they contemplated the trust shown by the master to his servants.

Here, if we are not careful – and some Christians do it – we treat material wealth as a gift from God.

Here, the riches are a sign of something far more important, the grace and the favour of God to us who are nothing.

We have no merit in ourselves that could make us deserve this kind of treatment from our Creator.

We struggle in the world to live good and godly lives.

Some succeed, but many of us don't.

But still God pours out his favour upon us.

Even when we fail.

The men who received the talents were servants, not colleagues or family members but servants, whose sole task was to serve their master.

They had no merit in themselves.

It was the generosity of the master only that gave them status.

In the fullness of time, God crowned his love by becoming one of us here on earth to show us that love in human form.

We may have tried to kill that love, but it is powerful, persistent and undying, for us, not against us.

Undying, yes, because it is for us now.

Who can refuse to see that in the Eucharistic life of the Church we are welcoming afresh the Lord of life rather than trying to appease an angry and distant God, the *hard man*.

As the Christian year rolls on to its close next Sunday, we are encouraged to contemplate the end of all things, when the return of the Christ will bring the consummation of the world's existence and purpose.

Of course Christ will come again – it is a core believe of the whole Church.

But our preoccupation must be not to be obsessed with this above all else, but to life in the present, in the context of eternity.

To try and live with the joy of those first two servants who responded to the generosity of their master and in a way shared it with the world they lived in.

To recognise the love of God as omnipresent and active, and to ache to share that with the people we meet.

To realise that we cannot stack up merit before God by our own efforts, but rather to accept that God cannot be driven away by our sin and failure.

And to see in this sacrament a genuine and fresh gift that Christ makes of himself to us every time we meet here.

To fail to see that is to follow the way of the third servant and to become closed in, fearful, afraid to face the world outside, and

wanting to flee to a place of safety where there are no challenges and to be ruled by fear.

The modern world needs God's love just as much as the world of the first century.

And Christ still stands with open arms.

Our embrace of the world we live in echoes Christ's.

And we do the world we belong to no service if we treat resistance to change as an article of faith.

Our ultimate security is in Christ, from whose love, in spite of our sins and failings we can never be separated.

No, not even by death.