**Sermon at St Mark’s 23 March 2025**

Lent series of the Parables.

Matt 25. 14-30; Isaiah 65.17-22

‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.’

The parable of the talents. So well-known, and it seems pretty obvious what the moral of the story is. What a loser. Why would anyone just want to bury their God-given talent, rather than use it and prosper? You will not often hear me quote Margaret Thatcher, but her famous commentary on this parable does capture what appears to be the plain meaning of this story:

‘Remember the parable of the Talents in the New Testament? Christ exhorts us to be the best we can be by developing our skills and abilities, by succeeding in all our tasks and endeavours.’ And then the killer punchline: ‘What better description can there be of capitalism?’ And, though she didn’t say this, she would probably have approved of the startlingly apt conclusion (if indeed we are talking about capitalism): ‘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.’

You may be relieved to know that I think it highly implausible that Jesus of Nazareth was an early cheerleader for unrestrained capitalism. But there’s no doubt that this parable lives up to one of the possible definitions of ‘parable’ – namely an enigma. What on earth do we do with this puzzling story, with its staggering financial figures and its merciless ending?

So, what is a talent? For years I’ve grasped that it’s a mistake to muddle it up with any sort of ‘Britain’s got talent’ meaning. We are not talking about innate skills and gifts; it’s an amount of money. I knew it was a largish figure so I guess I was thinking about a bulging bag of coins. It’s rather more than that. A couple of years ago we were holidaying in Crete, when we came across an interesting exhibit in a little museum. There were two big heavy flattish things which looked rather like quern stones – the kind that you used to kneel at and pound grains on to make flour. Then I read the label – they were talents. A talent, then, was a substantial unit of weight, against which silver or gold could be measured. Some of my research suggests that a talent weight was about the same as my own bodyweight. In silver, it was worth at least 15 years of wages, so anyone who owned just one talent was already wealthy. With five, they were off the scale.

These enormous figures must be somehow important to the gospel writer. Matthew and Luke both have a version of the story, but Luke uses a much smaller, more believable unit of money. Here, Jesus is working with figures that would have been well out of the range of any of his listeners. It’s a parable about the other planet that the super-rich dwell on. And yet is anyone other than the absentee master really rich?

The realm of masters and servants in Jesus’ time is a context we find it difficult to inhabit. Large households and substantial estates and businesses often depended on the labour not of employees but slaves, and everyone would have been familiar with the total control that a master had over those who ran his establishment. Some masters may have been relatively benign and others harsh. There would have been a hierarchy among those who were enslaved, with some acting as overseers – Matthew has just in the preceding chapter included a parable about one such overseer who in his master’s absence was cruel to those below him. He got his comeuppance when his master suddenly turned up and found out about his oppressive behaviour. We don’t have a problem with his well-deserved punishment. But the fate of this harmless fellow, who wasn’t corrupt or cruel and did protect his master’s wealth, seems terribly unfair. What can we make of it?

First of all, is it plausible that enslaved people would be entrusted with managing these staggering amounts of wealth? Well, it’s not impossible. Not all slaves did menial work; many intelligent and well-educated men were used as scribes and administrators, and some definitely did reach senior positions. We recall the Ethiopian eunuch who turns up in the book of Acts and becomes an early convert. He was the head of the royal treasury, and certainly travelled like a rich man, being driven in his own chariot and reading a very expensive personal manuscript of Isaiah. But he was a eunuch, so clearly he had in his life been captured and castrated. Royal courts were often run by eunuchs, because being unable to found their own families they were trusted to serve the interests of the royal family.

Secondly, doesn’t it sound weird to bury money? But this was a well-tried way of looking after it. The reason that archaeologists and metal detectorists keep finding hoards of treasure is that in the time when all wealth and cash was a material thing, and no guaranteed places of safe deposit existed, burial was the best way to avoid theft or pillage. Much safer than under the mattress. Still in the 17th century, we hear of Samuel Pepys evacuating from London during the Great Fire and burying his gold (and indeed his valuable whole parmesan cheese) in the garden of his country home.

And then, how exactly did those other servants double their money in the stunning way they apparently did? They must have taken on huge risk by investing it somehow. I don’t know – purchasing properties and renting out rooms at a big profit? Importing whole shiploads of goods for the market (but there was no such thing as shipping insurance then). Or perhaps they took on the darker methods that people have used since time immemorial to enrich themselves at the expense of others. Failing to pay their contractors fairly? Exploiting foreigners who had fewer rights than citizens? Selling dubious stock or using false weights and measures? People trafficking - purchasing people in the slave market and selling them on? Lending money at extortionate interest rates? It seems that our guy didn’t want anything to do with all this, not even, as his master points out, being prepared to put the cash on deposit with the moneylenders – usury was not forbidden outside the Israelite community but the moneylenders no doubt themselves worked in an oppressive way. Not for him this art of the deal.

And his disgust with the practice of ‘reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter’ would have had a lot of support, I think, among the crowds who heard Jesus preach, as well as in Jewish prophetic literature. We heard this morning the great promise of God in Isaiah that ‘you shall not plant and another eat’, that pervasive fear of the poor farmer or smallholder who feared conflict, theft, or crippling taxes would rob them of the fruit of their hands. There are so many red flags about the Master in this story that it’s hard to believe that anyone could identify him as standing for God or Christ. He doesn’t even reject the accusation that he is a hard and exploitative operator. So how are we to interpret this story? Are we to assume that Jesus didn’t invent this character, that perhaps he was a well-known mafia type boss? That his bleak conclusion is a comment on how the world is, rather than a sermon on how the world should work, according to God’s promises?

To wrestle with this, I stood back and looked at the parable’s place in Matthew’s gospel. It follows a major chapter on the apocalypse, the end times, the time of final judgement. And it’s one of a series of three parables. First we have the story of the wise and foolish virgins. Going out to light the way of a bridegroom, some just took the lamps they normally needed, some took extra lamp oil – and because the bridegroom was late, those without extra oil had no light and the others wouldn’t share. Cruelly, they found themselves locked out in the darkness. Then there is this parable, which similarly ends up in outer darkness. Then the parable of the sheep and the goats, where those who failed to recognise the presence of the Son of Man in the sick, the poor and the prisoners find themselves facing ultimate judgement. Though we may have more sympathy with the outcome of that one, what we have is three parables in a row where some of the characters find themselves suffering hideous punishment not because of something they did, but on account of what they **didn’t** do. It’s pretty chilling. The foolish virgins weren’t responsible for being late – they just didn’t allow for emergencies. The so-called goats weren’t actively cruel or oppressive towards the unfortunate in their world, they just didn’t notice their obligations. And our guy in the parable of the talents didn’t waste the money or lose it, he just guarded it and then finally – rather late in my view – spoke truth to power. And was crushed.

So what moral do we take from his story? Well, he knew what sort of heartless and predatory strongman he was dealing with, and as he admits, he was afraid. So he froze; he was paralysed; he delayed doing anything at all. And what about us? We too can see how our world is going, with the new rise of the political strongmen who are increasingly deferred to, flattered and appeased, their cruel methods normalised and adopted by those who support them. What I take from this parable today is not comfortable. It is the thought that more is going to be expected of us than we can currently imagine – perhaps a great deal more. But feeling afraid, experiencing a sort of paralysis, keeping our heads down, hoping for the best, and then when the worst happens, finally having a good moan isn’t going to be enough, is it?