

Sermon 15 November (1Thess 5:1-11; Matt 25:14-30)

What matters most, ambition or talent? This question is part of a regular interview feature in the F T Weekend magazine. A high-profile individual in the world of the arts, business or industry is asked a set of questions about their life and achievements. The answer to this question almost invariably suggest that neither is sufficient on its own. What you are given (talent) is important, but it is what you do with it that makes it worthwhile.

I've often wondered why the biblical people used the word "talent" as a measure of money. It might be helpful to preachers from time to time to shift the emphasis away from finances, but otherwise it is a bit confusing. I found out this week that in fact it is the other way around. Our word "talent" comes from this parable. The meaning has become corrupted a little and we generally think of talents as something for which we have flair, skill or innate ability. I suggest that in fact Jesus is talking about anything and everything that we are given. That may mean money and material things, but it includes the place we are born, our families and heritage, our senses, personality, friendships, experiences, even life itself. Sam Wells, talking about this passage this week said that no one chooses to be born. No one actively decides that this is the time for them to be alive on earth. Life itself is a gift from God. And there is more. God has given us Jesus, his son, sacrificed so that we can all enter into a deep, meaningful and eternal relationship with God. Generous gifts given in love.

Our acceptance of this generosity can be seen in what we do with it. If you give someone a gift of clothes or jewellery, you don't expect them to be stashed away at the back of a drawer. You want them to be worn and used. Who hasn't experienced a warm glow when you go to someone's house and see something you have given on display or being used? So, what are we to do with all these gifts from God? Do we risk sharing them helping others know Jesus and participate in God's plans or do we keep them to ourselves, hidden away from the wider world?

When I think myself into this parable, I have to confess that my sympathies are with the third servant. I wonder if I too might have buried the money. What does this say about my stewardship of the gifts God has given to me?

A starting place might be to consider why the servant buried the money? In this passage there is nothing to suggest an instruction to trade with the money, although the end of the passage implies that the servant should have known this was the intention. The Gospel of Luke contains a similar parable (Luke 19:11-27) in which the owner gives money to his servants before he goes away, with the express instruction to "do business with these until I come back" so maybe this servant was in direct contravention of his masters instructions. Perhaps, he doubted his own ability to trade successfully. He knew the master to be a hard man and was afraid of the consequences of failure.

Linked to this, you could say that he was risk averse. He would rather hold tight to what he had than risk the possibility of losing any of the money. We can all feel inadequate and ill equipped when faced with change or uncertainty. At such times we can look to our faith for guidance and encouragement. When I was expecting twins with a toddler not yet two to care for, I worried about how I was to cope. A friend gave me a small luggage label with Jesus words from Matthew 19:26 "For God all things are possible." That label stayed on my kitchen cabinet for years, A prompt that whatever life threw at me, I was not alone.

A scan through scripture will tell you, that God not only supports people who are doing his work, but, where there is weakness, he can work through it.

Jacob, having cheated his brother out of his inheritance, didn't want to follow God's instruction to return to his home country. We are told that he wrestled with God and God eased the reunion between the two brothers. Jacob, having come to terms with his past, went on to head the family that would become the 12 tribes of Israel.

Moses at the burning bush questioned Gods choice when asked to lead the people out of Egypt. God listened and provided support through Moses brother Aaron to help him fulfil this task.

David, seduced another man's wife and arranged the murder of her husband. His experience of guilt, remorse and then of God's forgiveness are expressed through the Psalms. How could he have known that these words would provide comfort and encouragement to people across the world thousands of years later.

Another suggestion about why the servant buried the money is that he may not have wanted to be associated with the master if the master's journey was unsuccessful. Kenneth Bailey considers this looking at Luke's version of the parable.

Here the man had an expectation of being granted power to rule in his local area. That was the purpose of the journey. Something that would have been familiar to Jesus' listeners at the time. Herod the Great made a trip to Rome seeking Roman appointment as King and so did his son Archelaus. Herod was successful, his son was not and was banished.

The man had an expectation of return, but it was by no means certain. We learn in Luke's passage that he had enemies who followed him, presumably to make sure that he did not become king. Maybe this servant did not want to be seen trading and doing business for his master until he could be sure of the master's success. Unlike the servant, we know that Jesus has succeeded. Life has prevailed and God is in control. However, we can still find ourselves in tricky situations and may need reminders, assurance and encouragement when we can't always see our way clearly.

So what can this parable say to us today?

I think it is a reminder about ambition. Not our ambitions for ourselves, but God's ambitions for each of us and for the gifts he has given us. The material things, the intellectual gifts, skills, gifts associated with our personalities and the places we find ourselves, the gift of everlasting life and the gift of Jesus. How is God asking us to use these? Are we being held back by our own doubts or need for security? Are we choosing to distance ourselves where there is a disconnect between God's plans and the ways of the world?

We are approaching the Christmas season. Maybe like me, you have been aware of chatter about how different Christmas will be this year. Of course there will be things we can't do as usual, but we still have an opportunity to celebrate and give thanks for the gift of Jesus Christ.

Another article I read this week was entitled "Christmas rebooted" It was mainly about economics and shopping habits, but has stuck in my head as an image of a season where we clear out the clutter, pare back on extravagances and remind ourselves of what is truly important. This may involve the ways in which we choose to spend our money. Are you, like me, shopping ABA (anything but Amazon) to spread spending and encourage small and local businesses. It may involve using skills such as baking or cooking because we have more time or aren't able to be with those who usually take on those roles. It may be by finding ways to connect, as we have already through Zoom and Skype. It may be talking to people who experience a sense of loss because they are not able to attend the Crib Service or Carol Service as they always do at Christmas. Perhaps we can help them realise that Jesus can fill that gap, even through Zoom. I'm sure you can think of others.

If all this seems a bit overwhelming, don't panic. After all, with God all things are possible. I'm a great believer in small steps and have been encouraged by the words of Jim McDonald, President of the Royal Academy of Engineering and a Christian. In answer to the question ambition or talent, which matters most, he said this.

"I was always encouraged to do as good a job as I could do and make what I was given better when I left it. I think that's down to talent and application."

That, I believe is what God asks of us and what we should strive for with his help.

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