

achievements or the notability of what we have done. He will be interested in whether we have given our lives to the use of His gifts and graces, and not buried them.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Today's reading is long. Do you believe you understand the parable, or is it too complex? What can we learn from it today?
2. Do you feel that you are numbered amongst those who are using their gifts? In what way?
3. Do you feel that you are numbered amongst those who are avoiding using their gifts? What can you do about this? Is the parable helpful or unhelpful?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

Christian discipleship is a journey of discovering the gifts God has given us and using them. It is also a journey which is urgent because we do not know when it will end, and there is much to do. We know that the Lord will want to see His Gospel preached throughout the world, for example, but our efforts to do this in today's politically and religiously complex world seem somewhat inadequate. Vast tracts of humanity today live and die, even in our own cities, without knowing they have a real Saviour and a future beyond death. Too many people either subscribe to different gods or mock Christian faith out of ignorance. To whom is the Lord giving the gifts that will break this problem open? He will definitely be giving it to some people somewhere.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Pray and ask the Lord to help you understand how this parable applies to you. Remember that the Lord acts in this parable firstly with love; He does not begin from a standpoint of being mean. His purpose is to help us become fruitful and be fulfilled in life.*
- *Think about ways in which the church as a whole can be more open in the use of its own gifts and graces so that the message of God in Christ becomes more visible and more fruitful in the world today.*

Final Prayer

Travel with me, Lord God. Travel with me through pain and joy, through persecution and victory, through distress and comfort. And when I feel as if You are not there, greet me again with a smile as I turn the next corner of life, and meet me as one who has waited for a friend. Thank You, Lord God my Saviour. AMEN

Prayer

We praise You this day, Lord God, Heavenly Father. You have made more things within Your world than we will ever see, You have made more opportunities than we can ever take, and You have made more beauty than we can ever appreciate. Give us eyes to see what You would have us see, hearts to do what You would have us do, and feelings to appreciate the value of everything around us: to the glory of Your Name; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Fire Services

Pray today for those who work in very dangerous situations, particularly fighting forest fires or similar large conflagrations that threaten life. Pray for their safety and support.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for the safety of young children in schools and institutions*
- *Pray for small businesses struggling to keep going*
- *Give thanks to God for safety whilst you travel*

Meditation

Why do people pass You by, Lord of Love?

Why do people sneer at You, Lord of Compassion?

Why do people swear with Your name, Lord of Justice?

Why do people argue about You, Lord of Peace?

Why do people make a mockery of You, Lord of Truth?

Why do people dismiss You, Lord of Open Arms?

Is it because they reject us, Your Church, not You?

Us who have failed to manifest the truth?

Renew Your people in Your image O God

And draw the nations close again.

Bible Study - Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴ *'It will be like a man going on a journey who called his servants and entrusted his possessions to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he set out at once on his journey. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more. ¹⁸ But the one who received one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.*

¹⁹ *'After a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The one who had received the five talents came forward and brought five more talents. He said, "Master, you entrusted me with five talents; look, I have made five more." ²¹ His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful in small matters, I will give you greater responsibilities. Enjoy the goodwill of your master."*

²² *The one with two talents came forward as well, and said, "Master, you entrusted me with two talents; look, I have made two more."* ²³ *His master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful small matters, I will give you greater responsibilities. Enjoy the goodwill of your master."*

²⁴ *Then the one who had the one talent came forward as well, and said, "Master, I knew you to be a demanding man, reaping where you did not plant, and harvesting where you did not sow; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, have back what is yours."* ²⁶ *But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not plant, and harvest where I did not sow?"* ²⁷ *Well then, you should have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would at least have received back my own money with interest.* ²⁸ *So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.* ²⁹ *For to everyone who has, more will be given; and they will have more than enough. However, from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.* ³⁰ *As for this worthless servant, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be great distress and anguish."*

Review

In His last teaching before He died, Jesus demonstrated the eternal hope of what lies beyond death in the plan of God. He could see it before He died, and He begged us to see this too. The parable of the 'talents' (25:28-30), sounds harsh, but it is no more harsh than the truth of death which comes to us all eventually and one day, all things will come to an end and we will be called to account before Almighty God. However, this parable is about our present actions which affect how we are judged by God when Christ comes again in Glory. Without this perspective on eternity, this parable becomes a mere debating point about the morality and use of money or the proper duties of Christian service. Its real point is about how we use the gifts God has given us in this life in the light of the next, and whether we have used them properly at all. God has given us all kinds of gifts and graces, and whilst the Parousia is delayed, He expects us to use them purposefully. Alongside this lies the question of what we think about God as our Master and Lord. Does He enable us to rejoice in and use His gifts (25:21, 23), or is He a fearsome Master who we do not know very well, if at all (25:26,27)?

The Talents This parable has had a profound effect upon people for centuries, and the English word 'talent' comes directly from it. A 'talent' was a measure of weight, and not a small one. Different calculations have been done to try and determine its value by today's standards, but none are conclusive. Certainly, one talent's worth of money was a considerable weight, and probably worth several thousands of pounds or dollars by today's standards. However, although the master in the parable gave the three servants these three differing weights of money, verse 15 indicates that what was given related directly to the abilities of the individual. In addition, it is clear that God did not just giving out money, but, as it says in verse 14, His 'possessions'. This reminds us of the way in which the Gifts of the Spirit are given in Romans 12:6 'We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us', and Ephesians 4:7,8 'but each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift ...'

Two questions therefore arise, firstly, what do people do with these gifts, and secondly, why have they been given when Christ will soon come again in Glory? This parable deals with the first question and describes the way in which the gifts should be used. What this

parable does not do is tell us why we must use the gifts God whilst we await the Lord's return. This is reserved for the next and last parable (the sheep and the goats – Matt 25:31-45), which we study tomorrow.

Using the talents All this is very important for both the early Church and for us, because in the early days of the Church after Jesus' death and resurrection, there was great anticipation that Jesus would come again very soon. So much so that some Christians stopped working and gave up the normal things of life simply to await the Lord's return, and there have been those who have followed their example ever since. However, this parable indicates that such a lifestyle is not what God wants. Matthew chose this parable for his gospel because it was important for the early church to know that the authority of Jesus lay behind the instruction to get on with their divinely appointed tasks whilst awaiting His return, and not avoid work or life. The Lord had delayed, and in the meantime He asked His followers to continue to do their work for Him.

The servants were not told exactly what to do with the talents in the parable, just to 'get on with it', and it does not take much imagination to work out what the Lord expected of His servants. During His life, Jesus had given His followers an amazing example of what it meant to do God's work in the world, and it is quite reasonable to assume that the talents were given to enable the servants to get on with the work of the Kingdom.

The servants and the Master The two servants who did use the talents they were given swiftly doubled their portions; they 'bore fruit' for the Kingdom of Heaven, presumably by copying their Master. Their reward for so doing was the approval of their Master, who said they would receive even greater responsibility (25:21,23). What this would be, they could not know, but it would be found in Heaven. These servants were also described by the Master as 'good' and 'faithful'; the second of these words (in Greek, 'pistis') is found only here in Matthew's Gospel and one other place; it is an important word because it would eventually become the word which defined Christianity (see Romans 1:16,17). Perhaps we must assume therefore that those who show true 'faith' in Jesus are those who do what the Master has told them to do, following Christ's teaching and example.

The one servant who did not do what the Master wanted acted more like Pharisees keeping the law. He looked after his talent as if it was so precious he could not touch it, so he buried it, and made sure that he could not be liable for anything! An ancient rabbinical source says 'anyone who buries a pledge or a deposit immediately upon receipt of it is free from liability!' Nervously, this servant appealed to the Master, but he was afraid of God (25:25), and for good reason. The Master castigated the servant because he sat back and did nothing, as one unwilling to let himself be involved in his Master's business. He acted rather like the Pharisees in relation to the things of God; their lives were so taken up with their own concerns that they were not able to consider that God might be doing something in their midst and that they might have some responsibilities!

The actions of the servant who hid the talent were like those of a man who did not recognise God as a master who loved him and had his best interests at heart, and he therefore did not engage personally with the gift or work he was asked to do. We should beware of being found to be like this! Matthew probably thought of these people as either Jews within the Church who persisted with the legal requirements of the Law and stifled the mission of the Church, and also those Christians who were so mesmerised by the coming of Christ that they, also, never engaged with the mission of the Church.

When Jesus comes again in Glory, we will all have to answer for what we have done with what the Lord has given us. This is not a 'Gospel of Works', but as the text itself makes clear, the evidence of our faith which the Lord will want to see. We can only ever present ourselves to God in humility of course, because He is not interested in the magnitude of our