

Sermon Wednesday 18 November 2020

by Rev. Bill Church

Reading: Luke 19

If you Zoomed on Sunday morning, your reaction to today's Gospel is likely to be: "I have heard this before!" and "I have heard Melanie's sermon on it." And you did, almost, because Sunday was Matthew's Gospel and this morning is Luke's. Similar, but not the same.

In both accounts, a master leaves on a journey and entrusts money to his servants.

In Matthew, these are talents, implausibly large sums, which has given the parable its common name, the Parable of the Talents, and has led to the modern meaning of talents as skills and opportunities. In Luke, the sums are minas, about a third of the annual wage of a workman, and so large but realistic.

In Matthew, the master entrusts different sums to three different servants 'each according to his ability'. It was the man given the least who performed worst. And I wonder: Was that a sign of good judgment by the master, or a self-fulfilling prophecy? In Luke, 10 servants are each handed the same amount, and on his return, three of them are asked to account to him, with strikingly varied results.

In both Matthew and particularly in Luke, the chief reward for success is not so much financial as being given added responsibility. And, curiously, in both, the master chides the indolent servant for not at least breaking the law of Moses and earning him some interest from the bankers.

The biggest difference between the two Gospels is in the background. In Matthew, you can envisage the master as a merchant going off on a long business trip. In Luke, the master is a nobleman going away to get endorsement of his claim to the throne, against the will of many fellow citizens. He succeeds and returns to require an account from his servants and to organise a grisly end for his political enemies.

Luke tells the parable immediately before the triumphal entry on the first Palm Sunday leading to the first Holy Week. Luke must surely have read into the parable the idea of Jesus going away to Gethsemane, Golgotha and the garden of the tomb, and returning to be hailed after the resurrection in the upper room as "My Lord and my God!".

The early church must surely have heard the parable as confirmation that those who worked hard and well for Jesus in his absence should be rewarded with leadership

of the church and the keys of the kingdom; and that an awful fate awaited Jesus' opponents.

Above all, both Matthew's and Luke's parables have a key message for Christians – that the skills and opportunities we find ourselves given are to be used fruitfully in our Lord's service; even if it all looks too difficult; even if those skills and opportunities are not evenly spread; even if our Lord is not universally accepted by our society; even if, at the worst, our method has to be unorthodox; even if we are not expecting to be thanked for it; even if the reward will be more work.