

33rd Sunday Year A

Matthew 25: 14-30 Parable of the Talents

Fr Peter Groves

Here's a very common Oxford story. A visitor from abroad comes to look at the famous city. A knowledgeable local takes the visitor around some of its most celebrated buildings. The visitor sees wonderful libraries, beautiful colleges, cutting edge research laboratories, and so on. And at the end of the tour, the visitor turns to the host and says "But where is the University"? This familiar tale is used in a famous work of 20th century philosophy, by the late Oxford professor Gilbert Ryle, to introduce the concept of a "category mistake". It's a term one now hears in a lot of different contexts. To make a category mistake is to talk about one sort of thing as if it were another sort of thing. In the story used by Ryle, the visitor to Oxford makes a category mistake by thinking that a university is physical structure, rather than an institution. In English, people often indicate that

someone has made a category mistake by using the idiom “apples and oranges”. It’s wrong to compare apples and oranges as if they are the same thing. We will only draw misleading conclusions from such a comparison. Instead, we should evaluate apples by comparing them with other apples, and so on.

Unfortunately, theologians are particularly susceptible to making category mistakes. This is because it is so very easy to talk about God as if God were an object, or something in the world. The particular problem here is the impossibility of knowing what God is. That impossibility might lead us simply to give up, and not engage in any God talk at all. But God wants to make himself known to us, and so the ways in which we do talk about God – as the creator, for example, or as the one who becomes a human being in Jesus of Nazareth – reflect the ways in which God has revealed himself to us, has allowed us to say and to know things about that which would otherwise be unknowable. The danger, however, is to think that by saying things

about God which sound very similar to the things we say about objects in the world, we are thereby able to proceed as if God were like a person or an object. That would be a classic example of a category mistake.

Enough philosophy, you are probably thinking. And I would agree, but I would also point out that this morning's gospel contains another example of a category mistake. I expect most of us are familiar with the Parable of the Talents. The story has given us, via Greek and then Latin, our English word "talent". What was originally a substantial weight or measure – 6000 silver drachmae to be precise – has come to mean some sort of natural ability or mental endowment. So we talk about talented musicians or footballers, and we are urged to make the most of the talents that we have been given.

That last phrase – the talents that we have been given – is the sense we need to understand Jesus's story. The problem is that it's too easy to read this parable as an

instruction to work hard. The person given five talents does well, and makes five more. The person who has two talents doubles his money also. But the fact that they do this by trading does not constitute divine affirmation of the economic structures of global capitalism. Rather, it's an indication that the recipients have recognised what they have and have used them appropriately. The man condemned is the one who has only one talent. If the fault to which Jesus alerts us were simply the fault of wasting enormous bounty, it would be the largest recipient who was the failure. Quantities are not the issue. The reason the single talent fellow is condemned is that he has not understood what sort of thing he has been given.

The clue we need is to be found not here, almost at the end of Matthew's gospel, but rather halfway through. The parable of the talents is told as a climactic story of responsibility and coming judgement, deliberately placed by Matthew on the cusp of the events of Jesus passion, death and resurrection. Judgement is on its

way, and we, like the wise and foolish virgins, like the sheep and the goats, must expect to account for ourselves. But halfway through the gospel we have been told something different about the kingdom of heaven. We have been told that it is something like a small seed, planted and growing secretly, and that the word of God is scattered across the field of the world, with some seed falling on rocky ground but other seed bearing enormous fruit. That which is hidden in the ground by God, the farmer of creation, is that which grows to fulfilment.

And this is where our one talent person has come so spectacularly unstuck. He has not realised what it is that he has. He takes his coin, and he buries it. He thinks that the things of God will come to fruition by being hidden in the ground. He is treating his coin as if it were a seed. But his coin is not a seed, it is a coin, and coins do not bear fruit by being buried. They bear fruit by being traded, by being thrown into the network of human relationships and allowing the work

of human communication and commerce to have its effect.

The single talent person has misunderstood the growth of the kingdom, because he has forgotten that it is not his business to do the planting. He gives himself away with the excuse he offers to his master: you reap where you did not sow, and gather where you did not scatter. He uses the language of sowing and of growth, but that language is out of place. The gift of creation is already present, entrusted to him by the master to whom he must now give his account. He has looked at his gift, and seen not a blessing to be shared, but a task whereby he will be tested. He judged the master by his own misunderstanding. He has not recognised that which he has been given and, in a darkly ironic twist, has misapplied the teaching of the gospel, and planted a seed which is not a seed. He has condemned the coin, which when used in commerce creates increase and opportunity, to a lifeless and useless existence buried in the darkness of the ground.

The parable calls us not so much to count our blessings, as to understand them, to recognise the ways in which God calls us to work for his world and his kingdom. The witness of the musicians whose efforts we enjoy this morning is a simple but significant example. But each of us is called, and each of us is blessed. Being open to God's will, in prayer and in service, will open our eyes to the talents we have been given and to the work of God in our lives.