

SP August 13 2024, Matthew 25: 14-30.

Refusing to serve an unjust system. Keith Rowe.

The readings:

Amos 5: 10- 15, 21-24 and 8:4-6.

Amos was a prophet in Israel about 700 years before the time of Jesus. Like all the enduring prophets Amos was a truth teller. He saw the injustices present in his society and he gave words to what he saw and felt. He refused to be quiet when he saw how strongly injustice was woven into the economic system of his day. He was impatient with pious people who went through the motions of religion but had no care for the needy and those crippled by injustice. The powerful of his day sought to silence him but his words continue to echo down the ages. These ancient words seem as relevant today as when they were first spoken.

Matthew 25: 14-30.

The parable of the Talents has in recent centuries been read as an encouragement to invest one's gifts wisely and with an eye to a good profit, to make money or to find comfort. (The 'capitalist' interpretation.) The word 'talent' is commonly understood as a reference to what someone is good at, one's gifts – but in New Testament times the word 'talent' referred only to a large amount of money, the sort of money only the very wealthy had access to. It's a parable about truth telling and being ready to pay whatever price or punishment is meted out to truth tellers by those who wield power in society.

Reflection:

The earliest years of the Jesus movement in Palestine and throughout the Roman Empire were challenging for those who believed that the Way of life pioneered by Jesus represented a way of life that could transform the way people live together and care for one another. Jesus described his Way as 'The Kingdom of God' and contrasted it with the 'Kingdom of Rome' which though claiming to be a kingdom of peace found no secure place for the poor and excluded, those who were different and those who sought new ways of living together in a just, peace seeking, inclusive, sharing and compassionate society. Roman emperors celebrated the achievements of their empire but for the common people of Galilee it was more like an empire or Kingdom of Death. They welcomed Jesus as a servant of life and of new possibility. They wondered how they too could be servants of life rather than death.

They began by immersing themselves in stories of how Jesus stayed focussed on The Kingdom of God and avoided being captured by the death dealing and divisive values of the Kingdom of Rome. They treasured the parables Jesus told, 'Parables of the Kingdom' they were called - seemingly simple narratives with a sting in their tale. They allowed themselves to be questioned by what they read. They asked what each parable meant in their time and place.

It's a sad fact of life that over the centuries the questioning and challenging edges of the parables have too often been worn down, domesticated, by preachers and writers unwilling or unable to hear the challenge within these simple narratives. Today's 'Parable of the Talents' is such a passage. The popular interpretation that finds in the parable an invitation to invest our talents, our natural abilities, our gifts, in projects that reap the best rewards for ourselves and our betters is a good example. I first thought about

this parable when towards the end of my High School years a well meaning Church father told me and others that we should think about the Parable of the Talents as we decided on our future and how we should use whatever abilities we had (I recall him saying that law paid well!). I read the Parable carefully but was confused by his advice. It seemed to me the parable was about truth telling - I was greatly impressed by the way the third and much maligned servant stated quite clearly what he thought about the greedy land owner who had returned to receive his unearned profit from them. His words were clear and honest: "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid and went and hid your talent in the ground..." I saw no link between youthful gifts and 'talents' which I discovered were a unit of currency. It was only much later when I began to understand the way society worked in first century Palestine that I began to make sense of the parable - and to build on my youthful hunch about the parable.

In the time of Jesus the older village economies in Galilee where he lived were breaking down as the area became more and more embedded in the economic life of the Roman Empire. Land formerly owned and farmed by extended families was falling into the hands of wealthy Roman entrepreneurs whose lavish lifestyles contrasted with the simpler lives led by those whose families had worked the land for generations. Village values of sharing, compassion, forgiveness, inclusion were being replaced by greed based competition, division of rich and poor and distrust of strangers. The introduction of the plough and the domestication of animals had led to greater agricultural production and the development of trade with other parts of the Empire. Surplus wealth was accumulated by an emerging elite and land owning class who purchased and sold the produce of the farmers, making considerable profits from trade deals with other parts of the Empire and collecting taxes on behalf of the Empire. The ancestral land of an increasing number of families fell into the control of this elite class when they were unable to repay high interest on loans to enable the purchase of seed or other necessities. Former landowners were reduced to being day labourers seeking what work they could during harvest time. Jesus had a lot to say about the greed of the wealthy and the needs of the poor. The saying that 'the rich get richer and the poor get poorer' was certainly true of first century Galilee. It continues to be true.

Along with these changes came the rise of cities modelled on urban centres in other parts of the Empire. In these cosmopolitan centres Roman customs and values dominated life and the ancient wisdom of the Israelite tradition was drastically modified or set aside. These cities formed an extensive economic and political network that between them controlled the surrounding land and villages. Wealthy elites, shaped by Greek customs and dependent on Roman support had strong links with the military and the religious leadership was largely in their pocket and did their bidding. The bulk of wealth and influence was in the hands of perhaps 2% of the population who controlled about 66% of the wealth of the society. This was the "Kingdom of Rome" that Jesus contrasted with the very different "Kingdom of God." Our parable is a parable of the 'Kingdom of God' rather than an encouragement to follow the norms of the 'Kingdom of Rome'.

The Kingdom of Rome in Galilee prospered because there were sufficient locals with administrative skills who were willing to dedicate their lives to the continuing prosperity of the elite class - in return of course for a generous share of the power and prosperity that belonged to their masters. In effect they turned their backs on their own people and threw in their lot with those who oppressed the ordinary people of Galilee. These functionaries who served the policies of the elites were paid a modest salary but it was easily supplemented by adding extra financial demands to the burden already carried by workers. Members of this bureaucracy, those serving the commercial and political ambitions of the wealthy elite, were kept busy - overseeing agricultural production, ensuring that the olive, fig, dates and grape harvests

were successfully harvested, employing day labourers to assist the harvest, collecting taxes on behalf of the Empire and ensuring interest on loans was paid on time. Commercial ventures like the fish-salting factory in Sepphoris near to Nazareth needed to be carefully managed if targets were to be met and production was to be sufficient to meet the needs of the larger Empire. The whole society was caught in a net that served the needs of the wealthy at the expense of the poor and belittled the traditions that had previously shaped life in Galilee. Jesus had strong opinions about these matters and he sought change. That's why he got into trouble.

Our parable envisages a situation when a man of wealth left his bureaucrats or administrators in charge while he was absent on a journey. Perhaps he was travelling to inspect his estates in other parts of Palestine or perhaps to other parts of the Empire in search of new markets for Galilean produce or perhaps seeking personal promotion within the power structures of the Empire. The staff who are to care for the estates during his absence are described in the parable as 'slaves' but the term 'retainers' or 'bureaucrats' might be more appropriate. Or perhaps the modern term, CEO. They're ranked according to their place in the staff pecking order. Our translation states that each of the workers is given a sum of money "according to his ability." A better translation might be that they were each given an amount according to their rank or status. A "talent" was a measure of weight and in this context represents considerable wealth. It has nothing to do with intellectual, personal or marketable 'gifts'. During the master's absence two of the administrators knew exactly what to do with the money entrusted to them. They made more and then more. The two bureaucrats proudly deliver this generous return while not disclosing what they have earned for themselves. The only source of profit for themselves would have been loaning money to peasant farmers and fishermen at exorbitant interest rates and taking possession of land or boats when the loans could not be repaid. They will have earned their profit and the master's praise off the backs of the poor. Like many before and since they knew how to work the system to their advantage! They've been so co-opted into the system that their consciences have been dulled. They're happy to receive their reward. It's legal but is it moral?

The third retainer is the focus of the parable, much like the third man in the story of the parable of the Good Samaritan. He's an interesting, courageous and independent man. He refuses to invest the land owner's money and returns the original amount to the land owner, not a penny more, not a penny less. Quite simply he refuses to be co-opted by the system that serves the comfort of his master, and could serve his comfort too, but which damages the lives of workers. He simply refuses to play the master's game - to make money out of the misfortune of the poor. Instead he criticises the master as an exploiter who benefits from the hard work of others while enjoying a luxurious life style for himself and his family. In refusing to sell his soul to a system that enslaves others this 'third man' exposes the unjust nature of an economic and social system that serves the privilege of the few at the expense of the many. We could describe his actions as like a non violent protest against injustice. This third servant is vilified, shamed and humiliated – that's the price to be paid if you won't play according to the rules of the game devised by those with power. Today we'd describe him as a 'whistleblower' who names injustice that others have regarded as normal and been willing to go along with. His action is reminiscent of the way Moses left a life of luxury and privilege in the palace of the Pharaoh and identified with the plight of his enslaved Israelite people. He stands in the tradition of the prophets like Amos, Micah, and Isaiah who criticised those "who trample on the needy and bring ruin to the poor of the land."

In telling the truth and acting upon a deeper wisdom than that available in the house of the aristocrat and among his mates the third servant is acting from a deeper and more life affirming wisdom than that available to the land owner and his bureaucrats. By his actions and his refusal to cooperate with the greed

of the powerful he declares the possibility of another way of organising society – one shaped by honesty, generosity justice and a care for the needy. It's common that those who refuse to march to the tune played by the dominant system are punished for their refusal to play the approved game. So we are told the whistleblower is thrown into 'outer darkness'. In the darkness of social deprivation he'll doubtless find a sense of community and support among the poor of his time whose lives have also been damaged by the actions of those who though wealthy in money terms are paupers of the spirit. There seem to be parallels with our day. There's plenty to ponder in this parable. It feels like it was written and remembered for our times.