

**The Vine at Home**  
**33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A**

**Call to worship**

Grace is here to welcome us,  
Christ is here amongst us,  
The Spirit moves by ways we do not know,  
And God comes close, closer than we can imagine.  
Come close, Lord Jesus. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

**Hymn: 363 STF My Jesus, my saviour**

**Opening Prayers - Teach us Lord, how to pray.**

[pause after every line.]

Let us pray.

Prayer in the music.

Prayer in the stillness.

Prayer in the movement.

Prayer in our actions.

Prayer in our everyday.

Teach us Lord, how to pray.

Amen.<sup>2</sup>

**We say together the Lord's Prayer**

**Readings: Matthew 25:14-30 - The Parable of the Talents**

<sup>14</sup>“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup>to one he gave five talents,<sup>[a]</sup> to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup>The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup>In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup>But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. <sup>19</sup>After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' <sup>21</sup>His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' <sup>22</sup>And the one with the two talents also came

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<sup>1</sup> Prayers by Tim Baker

<sup>2</sup> Opening prayers by Lucy Zwolinska

forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.'<sup>23</sup> His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'<sup>24</sup> Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed;<sup>25</sup> so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'<sup>26</sup> But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?'<sup>27</sup> Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.<sup>28</sup> So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.<sup>29</sup> For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.<sup>30</sup> As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'<sup>3</sup>

## Reflections on the reading

Today's Gospel passage is one of the strangest stories in the New Testament. It belongs in that group of sayings and stories from Jesus that we find a little bit uncomfortable and maybe wish weren't there.

Yes, we've all heard the straight-forward, Sunday School interpretation of this passage: 'use what you've got'. 'Put your talents to work'. 'Don't hide your light under a bushel'. It's not a bad message, and I've always been passionate about seeing people's potential fulfilled, and using our gifts, but I think there might just be something else going on here.

Shall we see what happens if we turn the thing on it's head?

The traditional interpretation hinges on one assumption, for which I can see no clear evidence in the passage: that the master / giver of gold is somehow meant to represent God. But is that really true? Jesus never seems to say so. Do we really believe in a God who would give more gold to people who were more talented already, or who would say 'to those who already have, more shall be given... and to those who have little, what little they have will be taken away'. This certainly doesn't seem to match with the image of the Kingdom of God that Jesus paints elsewhere in the gospels.

So, go with me for a moment here, what if it's the other way round...

What if this is not a story about how we should use what we have wisely (an interpretation that is helped by the confusing translation issue that the currency in this story is translated 'talents', the same word as we use for gifts/skills). What if, rather, it's a story about how unfair the world is and how many of us will be cast out by the system if we stand up to greed, or are unwilling to line the pockets of the wealthy with our hard work? Suddenly it becomes quite a different reading.

Here, we see the Master as a sort of archetypal capitalist overlord – someone who has plenty of wealth to spare, but only really wishes to use it to generate more. 'Wealth creators' is a modern phrase for this kind of master. He may not be evil, but he is certainly playing the game in order to benefit himself. Hence the story – he makes a small investment in three

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small businesses he is connected to, and leaves with an expectation of some return on his investment.

Of course, he does rather well out of the whole affair, his investments double in the two larger of the three businesses. But the third appears to function more as a non-profit, or a social enterprise company. This third investment does not grow. The third businessman appears to operate counter to the system of greed and wealth creation. He is doing something very different. He's protecting the money that isn't really his to spend, and getting on with other things – things which are far less money-related or not driven by profit.

And the investor is bitterly disappointed. The counter-narrative offered by this third business doesn't help him get any richer, so he throws him out.

Where is the Kingdom of God in this story?

Where is the Kingdom of God in our story? In our week? In our day? Have we missed it, because we made certain assumptions about what it would look like?

As we head towards Christmas and Advent, it strikes me every year that the incarnation of God, the birth of Christ, breaks all the assumptions that people have about what that might look like. The Kingdom of God comes near, and hardly anyone even notices...

We are the people of the counter-narrative. The Jesus-stories are about a man who resisted the status quo and built a movement based around love, self-sacrifice, justice and peace. How are we building that counter-narrative today? As a church, and as individuals, have we fallen in with the master's way of thinking: profit, self-promotion and 'growth'? Or can we offer a different way of looking at the world, which goes 'not to those who need us, but to those who need us most?'

That's my kind of Christianity.

Lord, forgive me for the times when my head is turned by the world's agenda, by money and wealth. Show me how to stay focused on your Kingdom.

*At this point, you may wish to break into groups or breakout rooms. If that is not possible, you may just like to ponder these two questions in the quiet for a few moments, perhaps taking notes and then find a way to discuss your answers and reflections in the week.*

Two questions for us to ponder today:

- How does the 'alternative' reading of this famous story from Matthew 25 make you feel? Have you heard it before? Is it helpful, or not really?

- Are there other places or stories in the Bible where there could be an 'alternative sermon' to the traditional messages we draw out? See if you can make a list of 3 or 4 stories and how they could be looked at a different way...

Let us pray.

Holy God, we thank you for your holy book, and the Living Word we can unpack from in your scriptures. Show us, today, how we can continue to be challenged and inspired by the stories we find in the Bible. Show us how to read, interpret and apply those stories today, in 2020.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.<sup>4</sup>

### **Prayers of intercession**

For our intercessions, we will hold three short periods of quiet, in which each of us is invited to bring our own prayers to God.

Firstly, we pray for those close to home, calling to mind the name or the face of somebody in our own family, amongst our church congregation or a close friend. In the quiet, we hold them and their situation up to God.

[Silence]

Living God, you know our hearts and our hurts. We commit them to you now, and invite you to come close to those we have prayed for, bringing them your healing, your comfort, your hope.

Secondly, we pray for situations further afield – taking a moment to pray for something we have heard in the news that troubles us, or for someone we have never met but whose story has affected us. In the quiet, we hold these people and situations up to God.

[Silence]

Living God, you know the pains of your world. It can feel like a dark world when we switch on the news, or read our newspapers. In the darkness, bring your light. In the conflict, bring your peace. In the brokenness, bring your healing.

Finally, we spend a moment praying for the church: perhaps this church congregation, the wider Christian church, or all people of faith. In the quiet, we pray for all who are gathering in worship today.

[Silence]

Living God, help us – your people – to be your hands and feet in the world. May we find ways to be an answer to prayer, to bring transformation in our own lives, communities and our world.

We pray these, and all our prayers, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>5</sup>

### **Hymn: 109 STF In the darkness of the still night**

#### **Blessing**

God of grace, Spirit of hope, Christ who transforms us – send us out with your courage, your love, your peace to bring into a community and a world in need.

Go in peace, and serve the Lord. Amen<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Reflection written by Tim Baker

<sup>5</sup> Intercessions by Tim Baker

<sup>6</sup> Blessing by Tim Baker