

24th Sunday after Pentecost

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By Janet Foggie

Introduction

Polarisation is often seen to be on the rise in the 21st century. Is it really? Is it framed as a negative in modern politics or workplaces? Do we value the benefit of seeing a range of views or opinions? Or do we think of the usefulness in telling it like it is, and dividing the world into two camps? In this story there are three recipients of the talents. Salvation is not a polar choice, but rather a scale upon which we, and our actions, are judged.

If we read the metaphor as the man going on the journey being God, and the slaves being us, then it also poses some awkward questions about the language Jesus used to describe God, and the way in which we view the idea of a 'master' as a result. Those who receive the talents do so from a master who is comfortable describing himself as 'harsh'. How does that sound to us today?

Text

Matthew 25:14-30

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 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.' 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.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' 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.' 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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have

what is yours.’ 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? 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. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Comment

“You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?”

What is this question saying to us about the metaphor of god as master? Is it a metaphor that translates well to the modern day? How do we understand the ‘master’ of biblical times? What do we think the audience would have expected a master to do?

The underpinning truth of this story is that the servant or slave was aware that his master would be harsh. Fear, as a workplace motivation, was expected and the punishment of ‘outer darkness’ was not an empty threat. The slave is not free to leave the employment of the master, and none were in a position to refuse the talents of silver given to them according to the master’s view of their gifts.

Christianity has, over the years, drawn different pictures of god and the divine. Where the twentieth century theologian might prefer to dwell of the concept of god as love, God as master has receded to the Sunday school colouring in sheet.

Perhaps that is to do with changing working practices. If we read the story again and supplant the word ‘master’ with ‘line-manager’, or perhaps ‘CEO’ the whole story takes on a different light, is that the meaning Jesus was trying to convey? For most of us, the reality is, we do not experience a master who has the level of control over us and our lives that a 1st century Palestinian master of slaves would have had. Our CEO or line manager has far less power and authority than the master in the story.

It isn’t easy to resolve the conflict of ideas between our loving god and being managed, being judged, or following a master. Do we tend to lean away from interpretations of scripture where god has control, and focus on those where the individual Christian, and their personal choice, is centre stage? Or is it that our ideas of a ‘master’ are themselves polarised and coloured by 2000 years of patriarchal interpretation of scripture in which masters are always male, dominant and divided into good and bad. Do we carry too much interpretative baggage to make sense of this story any more? Have we read it too often to be surprised by its narrative?

My nephew is French, and one of his annual trips to Scotland pre-COVID was to go to the Christmas pantomime, which we all did as an extended family every year. He used to call the baddies in the pantomime the ‘hiss-boos’ because every time a character marked out as evil or bad entered the stage the children in the audience would hiss and boo.

In interpreting the parable of the talents it is perhaps too easy to behave as if we are reading a pantomime script rather than hearing a story bedded in real lives, real

business practices, and in which the audience that first heard it would hear nuance and a reflection of the working relationships around them.

In this story, our views of personal freedom are challenged. We don't get to choose the gifts god provides to us, and what we do with those gifts is a matter of serious reckoning with god. The reality of 'outer darkness' is a spiritual reality, whether we read that as being an afterlife or a present on earth experience, there isn't any way of revising 'outer darkness' into something really quite kind or good. While it isn't a pantomime, it is also not a therapy session where empowerment and self-appreciation are the expected outcomes.

As we look at the politics of the world in which we live, and the conflict and polarisation that seems to be occurring frequently across our globe, perhaps we can learn something fresh from the god of judgement who is going to provide a reckoning, a tally of the good, negligent, or evil, things humans do with the gifts god provides? Perhaps we want to ask ourselves, our workplaces, and our politicians if they can provide an ethical account of their use of spiritual gifts, such as kindness, gentleness, self-control? Maybe this time we read the parable of the talents for our times, and in our lives, we are seeking a way to take the pantomime out of conflict, whether in work, politics, or church, and instead find a range of people with a range of responses, and an increase in our own spiritual gifts for the good and benefit of all.

Response

If you have never been to a pantomime, perhaps another equivalent would be a cartoon. In most cartoons the dichotomy between good and evil is drawn in an over-blown and humorous way. I wonder if you want to draw a conflict in your own life as a cartoon – who would be the 'baddie' and who would be the 'goodie'? What would the resolution be? A fight, a reconciliation? Or would it be a cartoon hammer, a 1-ton weight, or a packet of TNT?

If we rethink the same situation using the framework of the parable of the talents, is the reward and responsibility spread in a range of responses and roles? What does the resolution look like now? Does this changing perspective change the conflict you had in mind?

Prayer

God of the comic and the absurd,
who drew stories in the air and lines in the sand,
may we see your spiritual 'talents',
like money bags in a cartoon;
given to each according to their abilities,
in the transient, the amusing,
the artistic, pantomimes of life;
and we pray that in your strength
we may repay our communities
with the full value and beyond of our own gifts
that we have so generously received from you,

In the name of Jesus Christ, our master, and our friend,

Amen

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Paradox