

2 before Advent Year A 2020

Over the last thirty years I must have preached on this Gospel reading several times (although I can only find one sermon in my archive), but I am sure I would have said more or less the same thing, even if I had managed to find different illustrations - 'God gives us talents (gifts, skills - not huge sums of money as is meant in the Gospel reading) - and we are expected to use these gifts in the service of God and of his kingdom'. In fact, that is where I started last Monday, the day I always start thinking and praying about my sermon - even if, as last week and (I thought until yesterday) this week, I am not actually preaching to a congregation.

But then, another, indeed two other, thoughts came to me - if the 'man' in the parable was God - why did he go away? Does he abandon us? OR what if the third slave was the one to speak truth to power, what if he is Christ, what if he is the one to say 'this isn't the way the world should be?'

So, let us look at the first of these thoughts. Why does the man (? God) go away? Why does he leave this great fortune in the hands of his slaves? There must be a huge amount of trust between slave and master. It doesn't seem to occur to him, or

them, that they will take the money and run. The master leaves, giving his slaves room to lead, to grow, to take initiatives, chances - and to flourish: they also have room, of course, to fail. So, if the master is God, is he giving us all of these opportunities to flourish or to fail? The master is limiting his power so that we can make our own choices. Is God offering us gifts and space so that we can have a hand in shaping the future - how our lives, our communities, our families - even our planet - will develop from now on? Is God demonstrating love, not by doing things for us nor dictating to us, but by limiting Himself and letting us learn and choose.

The people listening to Jesus at the time, and those originally hearing Matthew's Gospel, would have known all about slavery. When Paul was writing to the Christian churches in Rome, it is estimated that one third of the people living in that city were slaves! Jerusalem was probably much of the same order. Slavery was big business, but don't think about the southern states of America or British Caribbean islands - mass forced labour under terrible conditions - this was quite different.

Why did the slaves in the parable not take the money and run? Because they knew on which side their bread was buttered! They were in positions of trust - otherwise they would not have been given such huge amounts of money - they had security of tenure - so long as they didn't challenge the *status quo* - their sons would probably have been educated (making them worth more to their master), so they could be sold into comfortable positions in other households. Far better to be an educated slave in the household of a rich man than a free daily paid labourer in a vineyard, starving when there was no seasonal work.

No wonder that the first and second slave take all the risks they can see in order to make money for their master - and they must have exploited others in order to make such gains. They know that if they succeed their rewards will be great. They don't want freedom - they want security.

But no matter how much they achieve they will still be in a slave/master relationship. It is their master's joy they can enter into, not their own. And how did they make this money - huge amounts of it? Presumably in the same way as their master - by compulsion or persuasion - get the labourers to work for a pittance (they have no choice), sell the food they produce at a

price they cannot afford, lend them money to buy food and then demand unpaid labour to pay off the debt - a vicious circle called 'seize or squeeze'. If the labourer - debtor - owned a little bit of land, you could take that in place of the debt; more land for the rich man, nowhere to grow food for the worker, more dependence.

It was the function of a slave appointed as a steward to make money for his master - any who don't do that become disposable property; give them their freedom (so you don't have to feed them) or sell them on! Slave No. 3 so disappoints his master that he is cast out into darkness - no longer wanted.

So what about him? We hear more about him than the other two - they are called 'good and trustworthy', which reflects the master's morality, informed by his economics. They are praised for making him richer, but No. 3 is called 'wicked and lazy' because he has failed to make more money. When the slave tells his master 'I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter' the master makes no attempt to rebut the charge - the slave is telling the truth - that is how the master makes his money - by exploitation. So fixated is the master with profit and wealth that these words

of truth spoken to power do not affect him - why hadn't the slave put his one talent in the bank, to gain some interest? He is totally disinterested in his slave's fear - his primary urge to make profit overshadows any fear, even if (when) that fear is about the exploitation of the vulnerable. There can be no second chance - the talent is taken from him and given to another. 'For to all who have more will be given and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away'. This might be a good working philosophy for the master and his 'loyal and trustworthy' stewards, but it is hardly a reflexion of the values of Jesus.

So, is this a parable about God's expectation that we will use the gifts he gives us for the work of the kingdom, or is it a parable about the exploitation of the weak by the powerful? Given Jesus' teachings about the dangers of riches, the abuse of authority and about respect for little ones (see M 18 & 19) the parable's interpretation as a coded critique of rich landowners abuse of their economic power seems consistent with his values.

The slave neither exploits nor steals, nor does he lend his support to the powerful, who do both. He, surely, is the spokesman of the parable's moral. And like slave No 3, Jesus will

pay the ultimate price for taking on the system he exposes; he will be dismissed by the power brokers of the system and sent into the ultimate outer darkness of death. And they thought they had won!

We beg to differ!