

IT'S NOT REALLY ABOUT MONEY

Zephaniah 1. 7, 12-18

1 Thessalonians 5. 1-11

Matthew 25. 14-30

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I think that in some ways, today's appointed gospel is very difficult to interpret. So let me begin by asking those of you who can do so to think back to the 1950s, and more specifically, to the golden age of television. Do any of you remember the popular TV series called *The Millionaire*? Each episode had the same format. Mr John Beresford Tipton, an anonymous and eccentric philanthropist, would give someone a cheque for 1 million dollars (a considerable sum now, but even more substantial fifty years ago); and the dramatic action of the TV programme would show the effect that the unexpected windfall created in the recipient's life.

At first reading, our text from chapter 25 of St Matthew's gospel appears to be somewhat like *The Millionaire*. It's about three men being given money; and you and I watch to see what happens. The tension in today's parable is between risk and safety. Three servants are each given a specific sum of money. Two double what they receive and are praised for being shrewd investors; whilst the third servant is severely rebuked for his lack of profit, having sought safety in buried treasure, because, we are told, he 'was afraid' of his master.

The master, we cannot help but note, is not particularly benevolent; and in the parable he is cast in an unflattering light. He is an idle landlord, a 'harsh' man who lives off the efforts of his slaves to satisfy and to please him. Furthermore, he's what we would term a 'wheeler-dealer' when it comes to right and wrong. Walking both sides of the financial street, he seeks only what would always be in his best monetary interest and gain. He is a greedy profiteer.

If we concur with this description of the master, we must not then consider this parable to be an allegory, and believe that the master is someone who represents God in the story. The master in this parable is (as I hope you will agree) very much unlike the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, that man who was an example of mercy and forgiveness and who clearly symbolises God's compassion and boundless goodness.

But if the parable in today's gospel is not an allegory, what is it, then?

I think that the clue to answering that question is found in the verse 29, where we read, '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.' In other words, and roughly paraphrased, it's an ancient way of saying what we mean in the adage 'the rich get richer and the poor get poorer'; or, something akin to 'where there's an imagination and a will, there's a way to riches'.

It seems to me that this philosophy is a wobbly foundation upon which to build a theological understanding of the Almighty! Rather, verse 29 hides the judgement of the parable, which is actually a dark commentary on the ordering of human society, and on the way in which the world considers money to be a source of ultimate power and authority.

I have money, therefore, I am; I have power, therefore, I am; here are two different ways of decoding the foundation on which the Parable of the Talents rests. Those who have money and power get respect and reward; and those who do not have it do not. This discrepancy makes for a lopsided, topsy-turvy, polarised world of advantage and disadvantage; of haves and have-nots; a world where difference is seemingly irreconcilable.

You and I know this world very well. We see it in the people, the places, the things and the events of daily life that are so often marked by chronic self-interest and entitlement. We see it in a world which says that happiness and security are to be found in having one pound more than one already has; or in envying those who do; or in profiting at the expense of those who have not.¹

So in my estimation, today's parable describes an amoral world; a world that is often upside-down and where the outside doesn't always measure what is inside; a world where wrong-doing goes unpunished, overlooked, excused, covered-over, or worse, is sometimes rewarded. It is therefore not surprising that a world such as this can and does go bankrupt! Today's parable also reminds us that we live in a world that is in peril of being lost in a sincere delusion, far from what God intends us to pursue.

But let me be clear. I am not here to say, 'This is terrible. Money and power are the root of all evil'. That lament is really not the point that St Matthew is making. I say this, because what immediately follows this parable in the Evangelist's text is a descriptive and poetic account of the Last Judgement (25. 31-46). This material, which will be the appointed gospel text for next Sunday, makes what we have before us today something more than an isolated commentary about conditions and life in the kingdom of this world.

Instead (and brilliantly so), this parable is a preface to a greater theological statement and understanding; one that the lectionary, or the Church calendar, will use to conclude the liturgical year next Sunday, on the Feast of Christ the King. In that sense, this parable is a prelude to the drama of the Last Judgement; it is a prelude to the final revelation and coming of the kingdom of heaven, an event which will overturn the kingdom of this world.

¹ The English Dominican, theologian and author Timothy Radcliffe notes this when he says, 'Money has become the point of everything, the ultimate human striving, the universal symbol, whose demands are absolute; the final reference point' (*What is the Point of Being a Christian?*, p. 155).

This apocalyptic or end time of God's final judgement is understood by the Church as being an everlasting eighth day; the time when God will complete the work of creation. Therefore, it is paradoxically a new, first day; one that is marked by the coming of the Christ, which will mark the final victory over evil and suffering and the eternal reign of Almighty God. This end time, which is already here but is not yet fully revealed, is the Christian hope and the promised future. It is not to be feared, but to be received as Good News.

Today's parable of a fallen world comes therefore as a sharp contrast to what is now here and coming amongst us; that is, the kingdom of heaven.

Did you see *Billy Elliot*, the film about the young, working-class English boy whose great desire and passion was simply to dance, a passion which made him all but a stranger in his own family and community, who had no experience with such a child? When Billy was asked, 'What do you feel when you dance?' his reply was, 'Electricity'. This electricity, as Billy termed it, made him alive; it set him apart from a society that was in many ways lifeless and limited; and which held him captive. This power or electricity made him who he truly was, because to dance was to participate in his destiny.

I bring the example of Billy Elliot to mind because the kingdom of heaven – God's gift of mercy, forgiveness, and peace; and the good news of the eighth day – should be our chief desire, just as dancing was the singular passion and work of young Billy. In God's kingdom, you and I have a destiny that frees us to become our truest and fullest selves; and that destiny enables God to accomplish in us and through us what we cannot accomplish on our own.

That transformative and transfiguring power, that 'electricity', if you will, is our absolute and final reference point. And it is a power that is here with us now. It is

nothing less than the kingdom of heaven. And even though this kingdom of heaven is attacked by the kingdom of this world, represented by the master in the Parable of the Talents, this kingdom of heaven remains *undiminished in its reality, promise and power*. It has the power to transform the most unlikely places, things, events and people, including you and me.

Today, let us say 'yes' again to our God, whose power, whose electricity, whose transforming gift, is Love.

Amen.