

## Sermon Archive 176

Sunday 19 November, 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 25: 14-30

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



In churches all around the world, in celebratory remembrance of deceased businessmen (usually men) whose business acumen has benefited the local congregation, memorial plaques hang, bearing the expression, “well done, good and faithful servant”. Thank you for being skilled in business. Thank you for doing well with money. Thank you for sharing part of that with us. It’s one of those totally familiar, well-worn phrases we bring out in praise of God’s successful servants.

On Wednesday morning, at the Bible study, as we read the phrase out, we found ourselves stumbling over a slightly different version. The New Revised Standard version referred not to a good and faithful “*servant*”, but to a good and faithful “*slave*”. Thinking about slavery, historically and currently (did you know that in Libya, you can buy a man, usually from Niger, for just under NZ\$600), we didn’t like the word “slave”. “Good and faithful *slave*” introduced something into the story that felt a bit oppressive, predatory. It was as if something relationally unhealthy had cast a shadow. We didn’t like it.

Identifying one thing we didn’t like, we then went on a bit of a roll. Also not liked by us was the ending - the fate of the third slave. He gets thrown out into the outer darkness where there’s weeping and the gnashing of teeth. Also not liked was that the throwing out was ordered by the figure conventionally identified as the god-figure. Is this story saying that God is in the business of throwing people away? (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) A traditional, allegorical reading of the parable would suggest God *does* that; and many Christians do indeed have faith in that kind of damning god. Turn or burn; live in fear. That may be a widely held theological view, but on Wednesday we didn’t like it.

Since Wednesday, I came across an article written by Stan Duncan, a “faith and justice minister” in America’s United Church of Christ. He suggested that our dislike was just the beginning of the story. For the original audience of the

parable, there'd have been a whole lot more to worry about.

There's the master's Plan B for the timid servant. "Why did you bury the money?" he asks. "You should at least have invested the money with bankers and got some interest!" To our ears, that's a reasonable Plan B. To a First Century audience it's an alarm bell. In Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy there are express prohibitions against charging interest. Loans themselves are described at good - enabling the poor to climb out of their poverty - but not interest on loans. Interest was considered to be taking advantage of other people's misfortune - whereas the proper religious response to need is to help, to make a positive difference - never to use another's need as a commercial opportunity. In the book of Ezekiel, charging interest is described as one of the greatest sins. And yet here we have the god-figure telling the third slave that he should have earned some interest.

Also ringing an alarm bell is the amount of money involved in the parable. A "talent" is a huge sum. This is not the kind of money "mum and dad investors" would have. It's not the "Matthew Jack has a small mortgage with the ANZ" kind of deal. The sums in this parable are eye-watering sums that would have made an original audience ask "how did he ever get that kind of money?" It's almost too big to be honest money. It's money that would normally be hidden in Bermuda, Panama. It might not have come out of the dark net. It might not have come from arms or drugs trading. It might not have come from espionage - but whatever investment it's come from, it's got a high-rolling feel to it. A First Century audience is going to suspect this parable's money is dirty.

Stan Duncan identifies the two common ways, from Jesus' time, that really wealthy investors would make big and shady money. The first was to finance the money changers in the temple. International Jews from all around the Roman Empire (lots of them) were required by their faith to visit the temple now and then. For each visit, they needed to make a donation, using money that didn't carry the image of Caesar. Coming in from the Roman world and from the Roman economy, the only coins they had were stamped with Caesar. Hence the proliferation of money lenders in the temple courts. The money lenders charged huge fees and often exaggerated exchange rates. They also were super-skilled at hiding investments inside the temple accounts, so that the investors avoided having to pay tax on it. Move the money around. Hide the income. Rip off the devotional visitors. The First Century audience will have watched this kind of thing going on. It will have happened to them.

Someone's making lots of easy money.

The second common way for making lots of money was making mortgage loans or bridging loans to small farming families, struggling to stay afloat in the declining Palestinian economy. These loans were often hugely expensive - charging anywhere between 25 and 50 per cent interest. While the Torah's approach to loans was the approach of "helping", these loans were designed to pull the farmers in over their heads, suffer foreclosure, and lose their property. They'd then either become tenants to the new owner on what once had been their own land, or become homeless.

Interestingly, under Levitical law, God's law, that same land would need to be returned to its original owner each Jubilee year. Each Jubilee year brought a responsibility to return forfeited land. It was common, however, for land to be on-sold just before each jubilee. If you no longer owned the land, you had no religious duty to return it. And if the proceeds of the sale were hidden in the temple accounts, so technically you had no money available, no one could expect you to pay any of your own debts. It was corrupt. It was wealthy people, aided by the religious establishment, doing nothing other than moving money about - avoiding paying others their rightful due, taking advantage of people needing to visit the temple, causing farmers to go bankrupt and become homeless. When the first "good and faithful" slave returns five extra talents to the master (an obscene profit on an obscene investment), the first audience has to ask "who's paid for that profit? Where's the money come from? Because in Jesus' day, those sorts of profits would normally come from the oppression of the little people. When the third slave describes the master as a harsh man who reaps where he doesn't sow, and gathers where he did not scatter seed, he may have been telling the truth. Everyone listening to the parable has been ripped off by money changers. Everyone listening has a friend who has lost their land. The third slave is the courageous one who names what's going on. The third slave is the one refusing to be drawn into playing that kind of game.

The third slave is also the one against whom the huge destructive power of the master is turned. Refusing to cooperate with the master, he is destroyed by the master and thrown away.

Why would Jesus end his parable like that? Think about when Jesus is telling

his story. He's telling it just before his passion begins. Within a couple of days of his story-telling, the truth-telling Jesus, champion of the little people, is going to find himself face to face with the chief priests, who will turn their significant temple power against him. He then will find himself face to face with Pontius Pilate, who will turn his significant political power against him. He then will find himself destroyed on a cross and thrown into darkness. ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me".) This is what the power of the powerful does to the small man who speaks the truth. This what the corruption of the corrupt does to the One who refuses to play injustice. But it is in the raising of that true and small One to life, that we discover who really is the true "good and faithful" servant.

Earlier in this sermon, I asked you if you knew that you could buy a slave in Libya. A CNN investigation has uncovered a number of underground slave markets there. (<http://www.businessinsider.com/humans-are-being-sold-as-slaves-for-400-each-in-libya-2017-11?IR=T>) Most of the people sold are people wanting to escape Africa, seeking asylum in Europe. They're part of the great wave of migrants who used to become boat people on the Mediterranean Sea. Increased patrolling of the Mediterranean has made it harder to complete the race to freedom. Migrants end up in Libya with no boats to board - boxed in. When a short journey becomes a protracted project, money runs out. None is left to pay the human traffickers. The migrants become debtors. So they are sold into farm work. For profit, obscene profit, the vulnerable are sold. Is not this a throwing of people into outer darkness?

I'm sorry that this sermon hasn't been a traditional comfortable affirmation of creative stewardship. I'm sorry I haven't been able to allegorise it, telling a simple story of God liking it when we invest well. This time I've not been able to cast God as the master. It is not in my faith to worship a God who destroys people and throws them away. But I can cast some of my fellow human beings in Libya as destroyers of others. I can affirm that the world is full of people using and abusing others financially. And I can affirm that in the face of this kind of monstrosity, the true "good and faithful" servants of God are the ones speaking the truth, calling out the crime, refusing to play the game.

We will return to this in our prayers, but for now we keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.