

*Jesus the Storyteller*

**The Parable of the Talents**

**Please begin by reading Matthew 25:14-30**

I wonder what your gut reaction is to this parable when you read it? My gut reaction is to feel very sorry for the third servant. It seems to me that the third servant did what he did because he was afraid of the master who, from the description of him in the story, is not a very nice master. It seems to me that the third servant receives an unjust, horrible, punishment. As I was asked by a Circle to write about this parable, perhaps some of you feel the same.

The common interpretation of this parable is that as Christians we are called to use our talents to the best of our ability in God's service and not waste them, and of course this is true. Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:7 says the very same thing: 'The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all.'

But still, I feel uncomfortable with some of the details of the story. Firstly, the word 'talent' in the reading does not mean the same as it does today to us. To us a talent is an ability to do something very well – such as playing music or football or dancing etc. We often refer to such abilities as 'God-given.' But the talent in the parable is a sum of money and it is a very large sum of money indeed. One talent is equivalent to six thousand denarii – one denarius was the wage for one day of work for a labourer. One talent therefore is a labourer's salary for approximately twenty years. We are talking here about an incredibly large amount of money! Incidentally, it was reasonably common for people to bury their money in the earth for safety – remember there were no banks!

Jesus was most definitely talking about money in the parable – not a natural ability to do something well.

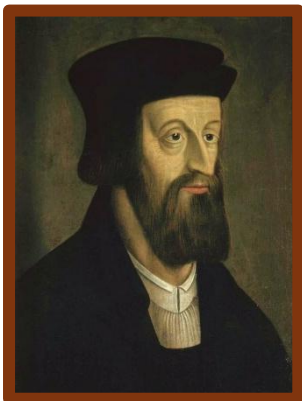
Secondly, I wonder who the master in the parable represents – is he meant to be God or Jesus? He is described as a harsh man – surely this is the opposite of the nature of our God? A God who gives us far more than we expect or even deserve.



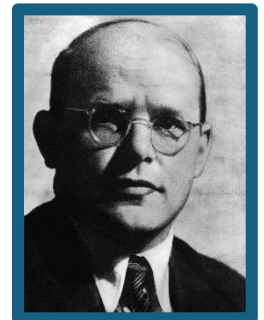
I think it is important to look at where in his Gospel, Matthew places this parable. Straight after this story, Matthew records Jesus telling the parable of the sheep and the goats – where those people who show care, kindness and mercy to a whole variety of people in trouble are rewarded. Surely, therefore Jesus can not mean that we see the harsh master in our story as God or himself?

The Parable of the Talents, along with the two parables that Jesus tells just before it; discuss the end times – the time when Jesus will return to the world and the world as we know it will come to an end. All three contain advice about what we should do with our time whilst we wait for Jesus’ return – be ready, do what God asks of you and - in the Parable of the Talents -make the most of your time whilst waiting. Perhaps because the focus is on the end times, we shouldn’t worry too much about the ethical behaviour of the master in this parable.

Another interpretation of the Parable of the Talents could be this – that the third servant is too concerned with his personal safety and security instead of taking a risk. Being a faithful disciple sometimes involves taking risks for God without worrying about the consequences of those actions on our own lives.



Christian history is full of people such as John Hus, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who resisted Nazi Germany) and Martin Luther King Jr (who resisted segregation laws in the USA) who lived out their faith boldly and without concern for their own



personal safety.

Whatever the interpretation of this parable is, it is I think one of the hardest and most uncomfortable of Jesus’ parables to read and to try to understand. Maybe that was partly the reason why Jesus told it – so that the original listeners and the later readers would spend time with it, wrestling with it, trying to understand what Jesus meant and how it might relate to our lives.

### Discussion

What do you feel when you first read the parable?

What do you think the parable is saying?

Do you ever experience God as a ‘harsh master?’

Have you ever taken a risk for God and/or have you ever **not** taken a risk for God?

