

TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Judges 4:5-9, 12-14

Matthew 25:14-30

Those of you who are interested in ancient times and history may have heard of the Nora fragment. I gather that it is a stone which is held in a museum in Sardinia, and engraved on it is what is believed to be the oldest example of written script in existence. It has been in the museum for years, admired by the public, studied by scholars. However in the last quarter of the twentieth century one scholar, who had visited the museum left a note for the curator. It read: "I don't want to be the one to embarrass anyone, but this fragment is displayed upside down." For all the years it was displayed the admiring public accepted the fragment as correct, and scholars had even attempted to interpret its enigmatic scrawl. Yet it was upside down.

This parable of Jesus' about the three servants, is like that fragment. It is a story which we think we know about, we think we know just what Jesus meant. The usual way for preachers and interpreters of parables to look at this one is to take the talents (which was a unit of money) to represent our gifts and talents, and to say that Jesus wants us to use our gifts for him. Many sermons along these lines will end by saying "You need to use what you've got or you will lose it," or, "Make an investment for God; risk it all for God."

But this is just one interpretation, which makes sense to us because we live in a capitalist society. Our heroes and heroines today are those who make money and are good at it. We may even look down on someone who isn't a good businessman or woman. And this isn't just to do with the people who work in the City of London, or at the head of the beleaguered banks. It's also the attitude of those who go to the supermarket and pride themselves on picking things up on special offer, buying two melons, say, for the price of one, even if they don't need the offered goods, even if two is too many and in fact one will go rotten before it can be used.

We assume that the first listeners to the parable were like us, had the same mind-set as us, because, that's how people think, isn't it? Well, no, not necessarily. Like so many things, it's a learned thought-pattern, a learned set of values.

This story can be seen in quite a different way, a far more radical way, which would shock and surprise. It might be too radical for some, too surprising: in the same way that many over the centuries have been surprised by the story of Barak and Deborah - that a man needed a woman to help, and that God chose a woman to lead. Very surprising! God doesn't always reinforce our stereotypes. In fact he rarely does. We should remember that when we are dealing with the stories that the Son of God told.

The people who gathered around Jesus and first heard this parable were mainly peasants. This was a group that had little to call its own (remember that Jesus counselled against keeping a man's coat overnight, if he owed you - that was because it would also be the only blanket). The peasants lived on only enough to survive from day to day. This lifestyle was not bad; as far as they were concerned it was just the way life was meant to be lived. In their first century Mediterranean world, the peasants would assume that everything existed in limited quantity. They weren't far wrong in that. Therefore they believed that if anyone accumulated money or goods they must be depriving someone else. There was only so much to go around, and it wouldn't be fairly shared if some were

greedy.

This was the view of God in the Old Testament laws as well. There he laid down rules for something called the year of Jubilee, which was to come every 50 years. In that year land that had been bought was to be returned to the original owners, so that the poverty which had occasioned its sale should not be passed from generation to generation, and no one had the chance to build up an increasingly unfairly large share of what there was.

So when in Jesus' parable the first servant takes his five talents and trades with them to make five more, or the second servant makes four from his two talents, the audience would not have been as impressed as we are. These were the villains of the piece, because if someone else was getting richer, it was the poor, the peasant classes who would pay in the end.

If the first two servants were villains, then what was their master? The third servant says to him, no doubt with his heart in his mouth, knowing her was burning his boats here, "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed." (v:24) And the master doesn't disagree. "You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter..." (v:26) In the traditional interpretation of this parable the master is taken to stand for God. But how can this be? How can Jesus portray God in this way? He certainly doesn't do it anywhere else. Is this the God to whom Jesus refers when he says "Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom"? I don't think so. Is this master, who seems to value the getting of more above all else, the Father of the man who told the rich young man to "Sell all he had and give to the poor, and then follow me"? I can't see it myself.

If the hero of the piece is not the master nor the first two servants, then it must be the third man. After all, Jesus often told parables and stories in which the last element in the story is the one he commends. In the parable of the sower, it is the last kind of soil which is the good one. In the Good Samaritan it is the last, least acceptable person who does the commendable thing. So perhaps in this parable of the talents we are supposed to place ourselves in the role of the last servant, who is a positive model for us.

After all, what is this man doing? He is blowing the whistle. The first two servants are henchmen of their master, going along with his schemes, sharing his attitudes and philosophy, and so also sharing his guilt of exploitation. The master and his heavies don't care who suffers so long as they get more wealth and power. The two servants are that most reviled of things - collaborators. Think how the French treated the women who had entertained the Nazis when the days of occupation ended after the second world war. It wasn't kind, but it showed how deeply people feel about those who collaborate with the forces that they find oppressive.

But the third servant didn't go along with things. Instead he did what in Jewish tradition was the most honourable thing to do. He took the talent and he buried it. That way it was safe: safe from him being tempted to spend it for himself; safe from him being tempted to lend it at interest (forbidden under Jewish law); safe from him being tempted to use it to acquire more, at the expense of someone else. He does the honourable thing, even though he knows that it isn't going to make him popular.

Whistle blowers always know that they are not going to endear themselves to their bosses. Often they ask for anonymity when they report to journalists that the

hospital they work in has not been keeping to proper hygienic standards, or the bank they work in has been playing fast and loose with the savers investments. It is rare for a boss to like someone who tells him or her that the way business is being done is wrong, for whatever reason. To do so isn't usually your path to promotion.

But the third servant takes the honourable course, knowing that to do so will probably seal his fate.

It was what Jesus was doing as he confronted the authorities with his more radical take on worship, on property, on right living. He knew that it would seal his fate, get him labelled as a trouble-maker, but on he went anyway.

God doesn't value those who are all get, get, get, and spare no thought for those from whom the getting is done. Who does God value? Well, the answer is in the very next story which Matthew gives us. At the beginning of verse 31 there is a little Greek word, ignored in most translations - the word δε. It means "but". And so the verse reads "But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all his angels with him...." It is a tale told in contrast to this parable we read today. And who is commended in that story? Those who fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited those who were sick or imprisoned. That is the sort of person God the Father values, not the grasping, wheeling-dealing, think-only-of-myself sorts of people that we see in the master and two of his servants in this parable of the talents.

Is the world ready for this story? Looked at this way it has a strangely pertinent ring to it. How can we be whistle-blowers on a whole culture that is based on the rich getting richer, and that being the measure of success? Well, it means that we will have to act counter-culturally. We will have to think about our acquiring, and the way we live very carefully. Our culture makes us collaborators in injustice, and in the continuing impoverishment of vast numbers of people. We are called to stand against the status quo, to stand against the expectations of power, to speak the truth about what is going on in the world - and to live lives consistent with what we say.

And will it make us popular? No, it will not. The third servant is thrown into the utter darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. But we are never alone in darkness, nor are we the first to tread a path called honour. Jesus was an honourable servant who was cast out into the darkness of Golgotha, where women wept and those on either side gnashed their teeth. But, although it did not seem so to him, God was still with him, still achieving his purpose.

We are not called on to seek ostracisation, but if, from following the honourable way of Christ, it comes, then we can hold on, because the Christian hope is the hope of resurrection.