

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 13 NOVEMBER 2011

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Matthew 25: 14 - 30, Psalm 125, 1 Corinthians 12: 1 - 12

“To Live Dangerously”

The parable we have just read may, at first glance, seem straightforward. However, as with all parables in the gospels, all is not as straightforward as it seems.

A man goes on a journey, summons his slaves and entrusts his property to them. Giving some slaves more, and others less to look after, each according to their capabilities. Two slaves work with the money and are rewarded. One slave, afraid of what his master may do should he lose the money, carefully looks after it until the man returns. The slave who hid the money is punished, the two who made a profit with what they were given, are rewarded.

If we assume that the man going on a journey refers to God, or Christ, and the slaves are people of faith, we can read the parable like this: God gives people of faith a multitude of talents, both material and spiritual, to work with. Those talents should be used to the best of our abilities to multiply God's gifts in the world. They have not been given to just enjoy, they have been given to work with. We who receive them should work with them with diligence and care, working as hard as we can, committed to the growth of all that is God-given in the world. Never should fear of failure keep us from taking up opportunities to work for good, to make things better, to grow the Kingdom on earth. We should not bury our God given treasure, but take risks, so we can make the most of what we are given.

However! (there always is one isn't there!) The laws of Moses tell us that it was the man who buried the money who did the right thing. In the laws of Moses it says explicitly that anyone who is given silver to look after should go and bury it, and not risk losing the money by working with it. When someone trusts you with their property, their property is not yours to do with as you please, but it remains theirs to be carefully looked after till such time they will want it back. In other words, is it possible that Jesus, in this parable, is encouraging his disciples to go against the law? To take what has been entrusted to them and risk losing it by trying to make it grow? And if so what does that mean for us?

And how do we look at a God who does exactly what the servant was so fearful of? Throwing him into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth? No wonder this slave was afraid. He had every reason to! How do these actions, these words, sit with our image of a merciful, loving God, who accepts our failures and helps us to overcome our fears? The slave had, after all, done what his master told him. He looked after his property and kept it safe. Is this the picture of a fair God?

Some say this parable is about the fear, and that it is not the punishment of God that puts this man in outer darkness. But that ending up in such a place is a natural consequence of letting fear take over where trust and dedication to the growth of God's Kingdom should determine our actions. Read like that the parable is a warning for how fear and excessive prudence can draw us away from God's presence into a dark vacuum full of futility and despair.

Or is the crux of the matter not even the fear, but the lack of love and trust for the master, that

provides the servant with a lack of understanding and so alienates him from his master?

What if the “man”, the master of the slaves, is not meant to refer to God or Christ at all, and the “it is like this” points us in a completely different direction? The direction of a world where it is “like this”. Where masters go away and expect their slaves to work for them in their absence, turning out ridiculous amounts of profit, reaping where they haven’t sown and gathering where they haven’t scattered? We all know that “it is” like that in the world. Even more so after the global financial crisis has brought whole economies to their knees. Perhaps it is the master who is breaking the law here, and drawing others into an economy built on greed, intimidation, fear and usury with him. This parable then is an encouragement for those of us who find ourselves at the bottom of the ladder, our knees knocking in fear of what might happen should we lose the little bit we have managed to keep secure in a world bent on accumulating more than it is entitled to and then finding that even that is sometimes taken away.

What is “it”?

My guess is that it is probably all of these things. My experience with parables is, that the more one gets into them, the more they start to puzzle and the deeper the mystery of their wisdom becomes. They never give a straightforward answer, never contain a simple straightforward recipe for how life should be lived. They are designed to make one stop and think. And think again.

Who is this man, the master? Is he God, or Christ, giving us a multitude of gifts, each to our own ability, to work with, to multiply, to grow? Is this story a warning against our natural instinct to be prudent, to stay secure, to make sure we keep our treasures safe? Is it telling us that what we should be most afraid of is fear itself? Because it can keep God’s good gifts from doing their good work, keeping us from reaching our potential, keeping others from receiving through us from what our Lord, in his absence, would like to see us give them? The poor, the hungry, the sad, the lonely?

Does this story tell us that if there is one thing that can separate us from God in Christ it is fear, and that when fear replaces love and trust for our Lord, this will make us end up in outer darkness, far away from where the light of God is seeking the reach us?

Or is it saying that that poor man, who ended up in that place of utter despair none of us would like to find ourselves in, is the man who did the right thing, followed the law against the tide, stood for what God had given him as a guidance for his life and trusted that even were he to end up in outer darkness, on a cross, God would not let go, would not let slip, would bring new life from that dark place?

A couple of weeks ago, in one of our many groups, we had a conversation about what we would do if we were to win the lottery. The general consensus was that we wouldn’t like to win the lottery, because we didn’t like the responsibility to suddenly be given excessive amounts of money to look after. Most of us would give some away. But to whom? Some had some dreams they would love to realise, but suddenly hesitated. Would it be the best way to spend the money? Perhaps put it in the bank first, think about it, and perhaps forget about it....at least for a while....

What would we do if we suddenly came into a lot of money as a Church? I’ve had a close encounter with two Churches with an excess of one million in the bank gaining interest. One has folded, and the money is now in the bank of another Church gaining interest. They are dreaming of several things, but when it comes to it they can’t decide what they will spend the money on, so they leave it in the bank, so they will be able to do even more once they have decided. In the meantime a small group of young people have started their own Church alongside the existing one. They give what

they can spare and it is just enough to pay the things they find important: education and arts and craft material for children, musical instruments for their service and the occasional meal together. They have all but forgotten about the money in the bank. They decided years ago that should it come their way they would start paying a minister who would give them some support for the way they have begun shaping the gospel and give the rest to charity.

The other Church I know has put the money in a capital fund. They are waiting until the money will be gaining enough interest to pay the salary of a second minister for at least five years. That minister will then, they hope, make their dwindling congregation back to decent numbers and a healthy life. In the mean time they have closed everything down that doesn't turn up a profit to help build the fund and wait.

What do we do with our talents? Do we risk them?

In the last couple years Tony risked what he had and has grown as a consequence of it. In the last couple of months we have had the privilege of being witness to this. Like the gold fish on the front of the order of service he leapt from the small bowl of the safe, comfortable and familiar into the bigger bowl of the wider Uniting Church and a totally different Church environment than he had been used to. Our place. What he found stretched him, shocked him at times, but made him grow. And the wonderful thing was that it made us grow as well. Together we learned understanding, wholeness, care, gospel.

On his journey he has had to conquer his fear of the unknown many times, before he came to our Church and also while he was here. He countered that fear in trust and faith. He made mistakes, lost at times, but gained far more.

Becoming a minister of the Word, journeying with a call like that on your life will take you places where you will find your knees knocking in fear, it will take you places where you will have to go against the main stream and stand for what God has given you to stand for, it will ask you to risk everything at times, for the sake of growth, your own, and the Kingdoms. It will mean you may be asked to jump higher and further than you think you can. You are invited to a journey that will be dizzying, frightening, but also exhilarating at times, because it will keep you close to where the action is, where God is, where Christ is, where the Spirit is at work in the world.

But not only when becoming a minister of the Word. There is a journey like that for all of us. Each to our own capability, each with our own specific, different, variety of gifts. Each asked to give, to be, to become, to grow, to risk, to trust, to love and have faith in that one Lord who is to be found where the darkness threatens to overtake the light and death threatens to drown out life.

Amen.