

A parable is meant to make the hearer think. It is a tease, a provocation, an incitement to reflection. If its meaning is easily discerned it may be a good story but it is not a good parable. On that basis today's enigmatic, obscure, open to opposite interpretations Gospel-passage is a great parable.

It sounds straightforward. Its meaning is transparent. We have been given gifts we must use them well. The story is retold in countless assemblies and Sunday school classes. "So children, we all have many gifts, which we must use well and make Jesus very happy."

A talent was a weight of silver. Only in the middle ages does its meaning transfer to become a skill. The rich man gives sacks full of cash to his underlings in the expectation that upon his return they will have made him considerably richer.

Now let us take the story at its face value with no background knowledge of Jesus' world. We understand it as a timeless tale. A man gives some of his wealth to servants with clear instructions and leaves them to it. Two respond to his command and return to him his deposit with a healthy profit. They are commended in lavish terms. The third, and in stories of three, the third is always where the punch lies – more space is given to him than to the first two together, the third speaks out. The wretch has done nothing to make more money. He has buried the talent in the earth. He makes accusations against the Master as a means of justifying himself. The master is as angry with him as he was pleased with the first two servants. The rogue is thrown out in outer darkness. In other places 'weeping and grinding of teeth' clearly means a place of prolonged punishment. "And so children, we do not want to upset Jesus, our Lord, do we? So we will always use our talents to the very best of our ability, won't we?"

The interpretation is not fanciful. It fits in to what we hear in the story. The problem is where is the tease? Where is the provocation? The prod in the ribs to say get thinking and work it out?

Let us now attempt to set the parable in the context of Palestine in the first century of our era. The land was being lost to the peasant population who had worked it as subsistence farmers for generations. Israel is a land of unpredictable rainfall. It fails to arrive on average each five to six years. No rain means no crops that year and no seed for the next. Outcome: famine and death. The solution: take a loan. When the loan is repaid all is well until the next time; when the loan is called in and it cannot be paid the land is lost. In the familiar cycle of exploitation and deprivation, the rich elite get richer and the poor die. A peasant who has lost his land can either seek work

by the day, beg, or take to banditry. All those paths led to death. Meanwhile the rich turn the land over to vines and olive trees, luxury goods which make them even richer.

The master with an abundance of ready income to give to his servants is one of these rich landowners. He does not give to charity. He gives with the expectation that his capital will increase one hundred fold. The first two servants do precisely that. After they have made a goodly profit for their master any further assets they will keep for themselves.

The third servant tells us about the master, added to the picture of a rapacious and greedy man that we know from the background setting to the tale. He is a hard man. He reaps where he has not sown and gathers where he has not scattered. These accusations he does not deny but accepts - "So you knew this was the sort of master I am" he replies. Someone who reaps what they have not sown and gathers what they have not scattered has a name. The name is 'thief'. "A rich man", says the contemporary proverb is either a thief or he is the son of a thief".

The rich man whose heart's desire is to be ever richer wants to know why his money was not put in the bank to gain interest. There is a word for that. The word is 'usury', explicitly and forbidden in the Law of Moses.

The talent of the third man is given to the first, the most successful, because money is always attracted to money. And we are told that to everyone who has more will be given but to the one who has not even what he has will be taken away. That is phrase we hear elsewhere in the Gospel. It applies to virtue as well as to money, so context is all important. Jesus was very firm about money and its dangers. When he wanted a coin as a visual aid, remember, he had to ask for one. Jesus is in Jerusalem. Only one parable separates us from the start of the Passion Narrative. Darkness and death after prolonged suffering await him.

In one interpretation of the parable the third servant is an example to be shunned. In another interpretation he is a hero to be imitated, despite the heavy cost of his principled intransigence.

A parable must make us think. Which interpretation do you favour?