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Introduction

Today's gospel passage presents us with an interesting conundrum since it can be read in two different ways which produce diametrically opposite understandings about the third servant: in one (the way this text is more usually read) he is the villain of the piece – the 'wicked and lazy slave' who fails to use what he has been given in the service of his master; in the other he is the locus of virtue in the tale – the one who, by his actions, refuses to be complicit in systemic exploitation. Exploring how such different interpretations are possible can shed some further light on our understandings of how we read conflict situations.

Anchor question

Are you surprised or disconcerted at the possibility of there being very different ways of reading a story like this? What things influence how you approach understanding a piece of scripture or any other foundational text?

Text

Matthew 25:14-30

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him,

‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’

But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.’

For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Comment

There are 3 versions of this particular parable – this one here in Matthew’s Gospel; the corresponding story in Luke 19:12–27 and a third version in the Gospel of the Nazoreans, which we can now only access via the quotations and allusions made by Church Fathers such as Eusebius. There are some differences between the Matthean and Lucan versions – for example the latter’s inclusion of fragments of a throne–claimant parable which shifts the ending from a household to a court scenario and thus expands the scope of the reckoning. However the basic bones of the story are the same: a man of status, privilege, and wealth, prior to embarking on a journey, summons his servants and entrusts them with the task of managing his money. Judging by the 5–2–1 distribution ratio, these retainers were differentiated hierarchically – ‘to each according to his ability (*dynamis*)’ could equally well be translated ‘..according to his power’, and indeed retainers gained power in the household *oikonomia*, at least in part, by their ability to manage the wealth for which they were responsible. Two servants make a return on the measure entrusted to them (note that a talent is a measure of weight not a specific coinage); the third makes no effort to do so and simply returns the deposit unchanged, at the same making certain accusations against his returning master. The former servants are commended and rewarded, the latter is vilified and punished.

One way of understanding the purpose of this parable at the time of delivery is as a critique of the Scribes and Pharisees and their ossification of the Law: in just the same way as the servant hands back the talent unaltered, so Jesus condemns them for – to use their own phraseology – ‘building a fence around the Law’. From this it is a natural step to translate this into a Christian framework and see it as a commentary on gifts which God gives and how we use or fail to use them: that God gives different gifts and we are each responsible for using what we have to the best of our ability; that if we do not exercise our talents we will lose them; that with use and development comes more responsibility etc. etc. In these readings, the servant who buries his talent is the one who is being held up as the example not to follow.

However this way of reading the text has been criticised by various scholars since it completely ignores the *weltanschauung* – the world view – into which the parable was originally spoken, and instead looks at it through a modern one which is completely different. In this instance the critical lens which is radically different is, as we know from the work of economic historians and comparative economists, an economic one. So whereas we read the parable influenced by capitalist mores on wealth, the 1st century agrarian society in which Jesus and Matthew operated was one in which wealth was a limited good. In the first scenario wealth is something which can and should be increased by work and investment; moreover we might see such gain as legitimate and proper. In complete contrast, the second scenario sees wealth as a limited good – there is only so much of it in the world and an increase for one person means a decrease for someone else. Thus the ‘gains’ made by the first two servants have come at the impoverishment of someone else. We see this idea repeated and escalated in the master’s response in vv28 and 29 and underscored by the the third servant’s ‘here you have what is yours’ in v25. Moreover v27 points towards another element or wrongdoing by the master (and quite possibly the other servants) since usury was explicitly forbidden to the Jews

(see for example Exodus 22: 25; Leviticus 25: 36–37 and Deuteronomy 23:19).

This all gives us a very different perspective on the third servant: through his refusal to become complicit in the exploitation of others, he maintains his honour in the face of pressure and the threat of punishment; moreover his description of his master in v24 lifts the lid on these wrong doings and exposes them to the light – in effect he ‘speaks truth to power’ as the Quakers would say. He also suffers the consequences which so often befall whistleblowers, reminding us that taking such a stance can be costly. This way of understanding the text has support from the Nazorean version mentioned earlier, in which one servant squanders the money on harlots and is imprisoned, one multiplies the deposit and is rebuked, and one hides the talent and is accepted with joy.

What we have then are two very different readings of the same text. In one the servant is the villain – held up as a warning; in the other he is the hero set before us as an example. Of course, as we have seen before, there is always the possibility that varied understandings and lessons can be drawn from a passage depending on how we approach it – this is one of the things which makes the Bible such a rich text. However this is a particularly striking example because the change of economic lens produces such a very different account of the character under observation.

Either of these readings could offer us things to reflect on in the context of conflict and our approaches to it: the first follows on very nicely from our reading last week as a further encouragement to actively develop the skills we have, and cultivate the habits of life which can help us respond with grace and hospitality when we encounter difficulty. The second might speak to us about the necessity of bearing witness to underlying wrongs and injustices in a system or situation – even if that places us in a difficult situation. However, and perhaps even more importantly, this scenario in which such different understandings can emerge depending on the world views which we (often unconsciously) bring to the text, ought to challenge us to be attentive to our own assumptions and perspectives when we try to read a particular conflict situation. More often than not this is an undertaking in which the probing of trusted friends and colleagues can help to reveal to us the hidden lenses through which we are viewing things, and in discerning whether these are producing significant distortions which need to be corrected.

Response

Reflect (with the help of a friend if possible/suitable) on a situation of conflict in which you are involved or which you are trying to understand. What assumptions are you bringing to this reading? Can you dig down further and identify the world view(s) in which these are rooted? Could/would your understanding be any different if you weren't looking through these particular lenses? Are there any others which it might be worth trying to take up instead?

Prayer

Jesus

open our eyes so that we can see more clearly;

open our ears so that we can hear more acutely;

open our minds so that we can discern more sharply;

open our hands so that we can give more generously;

open our hearts so that we can love more deeply;

open our lives so that we can live more hospitably;

So may your Kingdom come

in us and through us,

Amen