



### Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,  
open our hearts, ready our minds  
and fire our imaginations,  
so that as we gather together before you,  
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,  
we might discover more of your goodness,  
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit  
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us  
on our journey into fullness of life.

**Amen**

### 'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Think about a time when you were able to use your talent(s) to serve others. What happened, and how did this make you feel?

### Prayers of Thanks and Praise

*You may wish to read or sing the Taize chant below a few times, as you bring your thanksgivings and praises to God:*

*In the Lord, I'll be ever thankful.*

*In the Lord, I will rejoice.*

*Look to him; do not be afraid.*

*In him rejoicing, the Lord is near.*

*In him rejoicing, the Lord is near.*

### Psalm of the Week – Psalm 90 (Singing the Faith 816)

Lord, you have been our refuge  
from one generation to another.

**Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or the earth and the world were formed,  
from everlasting to everlasting, you are God.**

You turn us back to dust and say:  
'Turn back, O children of earth.'

**For a thousand years in your sight are but as  
yesterday, which passes like a watch in the night.**

You sweep them away like a dream;  
**they fade away suddenly like the grass.**

In the morning it is green and flourishes;  
**in the evening it is dried up and withered.**

For we consume away in your displeasure;  
**we are afraid at your wrathful indignation.**

You have set our misdeeds before you  
and our secret sins in the light of your countenance.

**When you are angry, all our days are gone;  
our years come to an end like a sigh.**

The days of our life are three score years and ten,  
or if our strength endures, even four score;

**yet the sum of them is but labour and sorrow,  
for they soon pass away and we are gone.**

Who regards the power of your wrath and your indignation  
like those who fear you?

**So teach us to number our days  
that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.**

Turn again, O Lord; how long will you delay?

**Have compassion on your servants.**

Satisfy us with your loving-kindness in the morning,  
**that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.**

Give us gladness for the days you have afflicted us,  
and for the years in which we have seen adversity.

**Show your servants your works,  
and let your glory be over their children.**

**May the gracious favour of the Lord our God be  
upon us; prosper our handiwork;  
O prosper the work of our hands.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;  
**as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.**  
**Amen**

### Prayers of Renewal

Liberating God, who brings good news to the poor,  
freedom to the captives, and hope to the hurting,  
we bring to you those things in need of renewal  
in our own lives, and in the life of the world we share:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:  
**God of mercy, forgive us.**

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:  
**God of love, comfort us.**

We bring to you the brokenness and oppression in our world:  
**God of justice, disturb us.**

We bring to you the times we've hidden from the risks of love:  
**God of courage, fortify us.**

We bring to you the failures of the Church to stand for justice:  
**God of liberation, convict us.**

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

Liberating God, who brings good news to the poor,

freedom to the captives, and hope to the hurting,  
thank you that you set us free to follow you,  
and to be ambassadors for your Kingdom of love.  
**Amen**

**Reading**     Matthew 25:14 – 30

### Sermon

The Parable of the Talents is an unsettling story, which can be read in a variety of ways, and on different levels. Some interpretations sit rather more comfortably with me than others; I'm not convinced, for example, that Jesus was advocating a so-called 'prosperity gospel', which links God's blessing directly with material wealth, or that texts such as this constitute divine approval of ruthless business practice. Yet, it isn't too difficult to find takes on this parable advocating these viewpoints, and indeed to stumble across other readings that, while more benign, also fail to grapple with everything Jesus seems to be saying. It begs the question: what do 'good readings' look like?

Back when I was training for ordained ministry, we were taught that a good reading of the Bible needs to bring three 'elements' together, and hold them in balance. These are the *historical context* of a given passage (which, in this case, relates to how Jesus likely understood questions of economic injustice), the *intention of the author*, and *our perspectives as readers*, with those lenses we each look through as we wrestle with the Scriptures. The emphasis that we place on each of these three components will vary, but when our readings become skewed too heavily in any one direction or another, they risk ending up being unbalanced, pulling the text 'out of shape' and distorting it, rather than allowing it to come to life, and speak into our context. In addition, we need to examine the practical implications of our views. Readings violating the fundamental principle that everyone matters to God fall short of the standards of 'good reading' to which we must

endeavour to hold ourselves. This includes using the Parable of the Talents to justify unrestrained profiteering, and exploiting vulnerable people by promising divine blessings in return for cash donations.

The first thing to note about this Parable – which differs in emphasis from a fairly similar story seen in Luke 19:11 – 27 – is that the Greek word *talanton* from which we derive our English word ‘talent’ means something rather different to what we might assume. When we think of someone’s talents, it brings to mind their individual skills and gifts. However, the Greek word does not carry any of these connotations; a *talanton* was an extremely valuable silver coin – worth around the amount an ordinary labourer might expect to earn over fifteen years – but that was the only meaning the word had. Thus, when sermons interpret the Parable of the Talents in terms of not wasting our God-given gifts, the *message* might be laudable, but the same cannot be said for the *reading* of the text! If we’re going to read it well, we need to both resist the desire to find a ‘family friendly’ message that takes the edge of the parable, and be prepared to overcome any reticence we might have in thinking about its implications for economic ethics.

In many ways, the stark statement in Matthew 25:29 about even the little that those with basically nothing do have being taken from them frames all that comes before it in this Parable. Some commentators suspect this verse was a late addition to the story, either by Matthew or a subsequent editor. I reckon it inadvertently reveals much about the ways in which Matthew struggled to make sense of the Kingdom of Heaven, and ended up drawing parallels with the Roman Empire, assuming that its culture would be *mirrored within* (rather than being *critiqued by*) God’s Kingdom. So, if we want to understand the intent of the author(s), we must be ready to accept that the Gospel writers were as human and fallible as the rest of us! It could be that Jesus’s warning here was intended for the religious elites of the Israel of his day, whom he called out in Matthew 23, or it might be that Matthew’s community contained people who did not take God’s work seriously.

Either way, if we assume that the master in this Parable symbolises God, then that third servant is like those failing to shine out the light of faith (Matthew 5:14 – 16). The story thus becomes an exhortation to faithful discipleship, which (once again) is a laudable message.

However, what if that reading fails to ‘cut the mustard’? What if there are unexamined assumptions about the way the world works, which we are in danger of *reading into* this parable? Firstly, and obviously, it is difficult to square the picture of Jesus (which we see throughout the New Testament) as One who literally embodied God’s love, with the story’s depiction of an absentee landlord who does not seriously dispute the third servant’s less-than-flattering view of him as a harsh businessman seizing crops from tenant farmers behind on their rent payments (Matthew 25:24 – 26). This alone ought to set alarm bells ringing! Secondly, while burying money might well seem strange to us as modern readers, in an era before banks it was often the safest way in which to protect valuables. Moreover, collecting interest from fellow Jews was illegal under the Law of Moses; see Exodus 22:25, Deuteronomy 23:19 – 20, and Leviticus 25:36 – 37. Thirdly, Barbara Reid explains within her commentary how Jesus didn’t live under a capitalist system, but one that was defined by the concept of ‘limited good’. This meant that people increasing their wealth were seen as doing so at the expense of those people around them, and anybody amassing huge sums was framed as being “greedy and wicked”.

Armed with these pieces of information, our readings of the Parable of the Talents may well lead us down some very unexpected roads! If Reid is correct about how the first hearers of this story would have reacted to the servants who doubled the huge sums of money which were entrusted to them, then perhaps Jesus (who himself would be cast out into the outer darkness of Golgotha, shortly after telling this parable to his disciples) has more in common with the third servant, than the master (Matthew 25:30). Maybe Jesus told this story as he sought to call out the exploitation of the poorest and most vulnerable

by a greedy and ruthless 'ruling elite', and to prime his disciples with the inspiration to pursue this after the crucifixion and resurrection.

A lot hinges on whether we equate the master in this Parable of the Talents with God or with those figures who conspired against Jesus. The religious authorities of the day wielded huge political power and had as many reasons to oppose Jesus's turning the socioeconomic order on its head as the Roman Empire and its local envoy, Pontius Pilate. In the context of the unfolding narrative of Matthew's version of the Passion of Christ, parables such as this packed a real punch. A good reading of this passage does not shy away from this, or from its implications for today. Are we prepared to challenge the ways in which injustice and exploitation shape our world, as the servant did by refusing to play the master's game? Dare we ask ourselves hard questions about the way we live, and use our voices to proclaim the Kingdom of God by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly but publicly with God? May we have the courage to do so. Amen

### **Recommended Resource of the Week**

John Dominic Crossan's 2012 book *The Power of Parable* explores how the parables Jesus told shaped those stories the authors of the four Gospels would later tell about him, which links with the outcome of the story in the Parable of the Talents...

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Liberating God,  
you came to bring good news to the poor.  
We pray for all of those struggling to make ends meet,  
for those whose livelihoods have been decimated by Covid,  
and those parts of the world where grinding poverty  
is the everyday norm for far too many people.  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

Liberating God,  
you came to bring release to the captives.  
We pray for those in prison across the world,  
for those who work in criminal justice and victims of crime,  
for those imprisoned by sadness, grief or despair,  
and those feeling trapped by mental health struggles.  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

Liberating God,  
you came to bring recovery of sight to the blind.  
We pray for those blinded to their worth by abuse and hate,  
for those routinely overlooked in deeply unequal societies  
and the people pushed to the margins by populist policies,  
and those struggling to see a positive future for themselves.  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

Liberating God,  
you came to let the oppressed go free.  
We pray for those whose lives are overshadowed by conflict,  
those living under oppressive regimes across the world,  
people oppressed by the stifling moral effect of affluence,  
and those facing discrimination because of who they are.  
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

In a time of quiet, we bring our prayers for those people  
on our hearts today to God...

### **Lord's Prayer**

### **Blessing**