

Investing in the Kingdom of God

Matthew 25:14-30

At the beginning of the service I made popcorn with the children and we looked at how most of the kernels get hot and expand to become much softer and delicious, but a few stay hard.

Cast your mind back to my little popcorn illustration with the children, and then think about the Parable of the talents that we heard in our Gospel this morning. What do you think the tenuous connection, or connections, could be?

Take answers. Don't offer an answer.

Listen to this, and see if the point I'm making, if not the tenuous connection itself, helps you grow, puff up and be spiritually a bit softer and tastier this morning? Hopefully you'll be able to play your part in God's Kingdom more fully as a result.

When Jesus originally told the Parable of the Talents, he was speaking to the people who concerned him most at that particular point in time. It is just before the Feast of the Passover, in what we now know as Holy Week. Jesus is only too well aware of the fact that he is about to be killed by the religious powers of his day. Why? Because they are refusing to accept that the wonderful promises that God had made to the people of Israel - regarding it being a light to the whole world through the gift of a Messiah - are being fulfilled in Jesus. The wealth of wisdom and insight handed down through the faithful patriarchs, prophets and kings and interpreted in the laws, rules, theology and teaching of the scribes and Pharisees, was being wasted because in relation to Jesus, they were burying that wealth in the ground, rather than investing it in understanding and acting on this new thing that God was doing for and through the people of Israel. Hardened as they were to their living God (hard un-popped corn), it was they who Jesus knew would be thrown into the outer darkness of abandonment by God.

As well as considering its purpose when Jesus first told it, this Kingdom parable can be interpreted appropriately with the rest of scripture to talk about the God-given talents that we have and how we use them, and to consider God bringing judgement on us when Jesus returns, among other themes. All perfectly appropriate and useful.

Yet, at its heart, this parable talks about money, and how it is used. It's all very well knowing that we get our English word talent from this parable, but we mustn't forget that a 'talent' in Jesus's day was money, and a lot of money at that. One talent was roughly equivalent to 15 **years** of wages for a labourer! That's how much the last servant in the parable buried in the ground for a long period of time. No wonder when the master came

back he was incredibly cross; even at the rates of interest that we're used to these days, a deposit account would have netted a few quid profit!

Of course what the more creative servants did with their five and two talent allocations was not to deposit it with the bank, but to trade, or we might say today, invest it. Jesus' language suggests a trade in goods or services, not a one off action to bury or even deposit the money, but an ongoing process that continually took decisions about what the best use of the money was, spent it on those things, received money back through the sale of those goods or services, and then started that process all over again. If we do that today with units of stocks and shares, or actual goods that we buy or make and sell on, it's regarded as an investment and involves a certain degree of risk - risk that we're making the right decisions, or that others are behaving appropriately with our money. Investing money can reap significantly better rewards than a deposit account, even in today's economy, though we're unlikely to make the return of 100% that Jesus signifies in his parable!

The word 'investment' comes from the same root as words like vestment (what I'm wearing, something I put on to share in the meal that Jesus offers us), and investiture, which we associate with giving people an extra layer of honour for some good work they have done. If we think about another Kingdom parable a few weeks ago, people are meant to put on new, fine clothes for the wedding banquet of God's Son. There is a new layer of bright, clean goodness with which we are called to meet God, just as in this parable we are being asked to act in such a way that there is a new, fresh accrual of wealth with which to greet him.

Lerys and I were hearing this week that the Church of England has stopped the old system of holding its long-term wealth, which limited its spending to the basic interest that it could earn in that way. It has decided instead that as well as being more careful where that wealth is held, the best way of resourcing the church to grow future generations of Christians is to invest carefully selected chunks of the original assets for specific projects they consider worth spending them on. Each diocese is effectively now bidding for a share of not simply the profits but the original investment, which *it* then has to invest wisely, not for financial return necessarily but to grow the number of people who know about and engage faithfully in a journey of discipleship with God.

As churches, as individuals, we are asked to invest similarly. The Common Mission Fund, what used to be known as the Parish Share, is designed to do exactly what it says on the tin: fund our common, shared mission as Christians across the diocese. So, the necessarily increasing amounts that each church is asked to pay from our own pockets, is invested in things like paying the wages of stipendiary clergy from Lerys to our Bishops, and funds training for not just clergy but LLMs (like Jane) and others called to a range of authorised ministries. It also goes from this diocese to those whose poverty and population are greater; Winchester offers ongoing support to the Diocese of Newcastle and our many links with the Anglican Church worldwide, not least those in Myanmar and the Democratic

Republic of Congo, places where we're all aware God's love and grace needs to be urgently heard and felt.

In our Life Groups here in St. Mary's, we've spent this term questioning ourselves as to how generous we are with what God has given us, financially and other ways. I'm getting some interesting feedback that will go to PCC this week as to how our answers could change what we might term our investment lifestyle as both individuals and a church, so that we witness more effectively to the generosity of God, and work more efficiently to extend and grow his Kingdom here. Lerys too will have something to say next week about the shortfall that currently exists between what our combined financial offerings are, and the financial commitments they need to fulfil.

This is all serious stuff, a long way from a pile of popcorn (bowl of pre-popped fresh popcorn). So what's the connection? To make the corn pop, there has to be heat (if not in this instance a flame) and a rushing wind. As the corn is turned this way and that in the heat, so it is changed, at least doubling its size, become soft, almost fluffy, and delicious. Now you know why I use this illustration for Pentecost! The heat, is the investment, the risk, the cost of turning something hard into something useful, like we are changed by God through our discipleship and the power of the Holy Spirit into something that tastes more of God's Kingdom.

As you take home or eat some popcorn at the end of the service, please consider this week, how it is that God wants to change the way we use the money he has given us. Allow the Holy Spirit to turn our thoughts this way and that in the heat of our commitment to respond to Jesus teaching; have we looked at the amount of money we are trading and investing for God recently, or has become a static deposit we rarely consider changing, or simply been buried in other considerations and concerns?

Let us pray that as individuals, families and a community of Christians, we can wholeheartedly investing our money, as well as our time and skills, in the Kingdom of God and how that Kingdom can be extended in this place.