**Matthew 25:14-30**

*Bishop’s Sermon, 15.11.20*

*‘Sarah-Jayne, I’ve been wondering what you do, and now I know what you do… You’ve moved yourself over into a convenient place, and I think you’ve been in that convenient place for the last six weeks. For that reason, Sarah-Jayne, you’re fired!’*

Well, the firing of Sarah-Jayne Clark in week 6 of the Apprentice caused quite a stir among fans of the show, because on the surface she’d done nothing wrong. She’d been on the winning side for most of the past few weeks. She’d been a good team member and a reasonable team leader too. She was popular among her fellow contestants. Her only mistake, it seems, is that she’d consistently played it safe, taking low risks or no risks at all. That was the ‘convenient place’ that led to the dreaded sight of the Lord Sugar finger extended towards her.

And today’s Parable of the Talents has something of the feel of *The Apprentice* about it. ‘Here are five talents’, said the master to one of his slaves in the parable. ‘Here are two’, he said to another; ‘Here is one’, to a third. ‘Look after them, until I return’. And then he left for a long while before returning on what St. Paul describes as ‘the day of the Lord’ and summoning them to the dreaded boardroom.

A talent was both a unit of weight and a unit of currency in Jesus’ day and was worth 6000 denarii – a denarius being what most people earned for a day’s work. Take 6000 of those, and a talent was worth nearly half a million pounds. It was a shedload of money, in other words. And the master didn’t spell out just what he wanted them to do in terms of using that money or investing it. Instead he encouraged their initiative, giving them the freedom and dignity to figure it out for themselves.

So as the three returned to the boardroom, the first announced that he had traded with his master’s investment, and doubled it, and likewise the second. Their five talents and two talents had become 10 and 4: that’s £5 million and £2 million pounds to you and me. ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave’, said the master in response to each, ‘You have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Come and enter your Master’s happiness’.

So onto the third one – and here the conversation with the Lord Sugar of the parable took a most unlikely turn. First the apprentice came very close to insulting his lord, calling him a ‘harsh man’, even a dishonest man, who ‘reaped where he didn’t sow and gathered where he did not scatter seed’ – that slander was probably enough to get him fired on the spot. And next he continued in a similarly sulky way, informing the master that he’d buried his £500,000 in the ground – and now, here it was – a little dirtier than when he’d first got it perhaps, but otherwise just as the master had given it to him – ‘Nothing added, nothing taken away’, to quote the strapline for Shredded Wheat. ‘You wicked and lazy slave’, was the master’s response: ‘if that’s what you thought of me, you could at least have put the money in the bank and got some interest on it!’ And so the man’s talent was taken from him and added to the fortunes of the 5-talent man, the so-called ‘worthless slave’ was thrown out of the boardroom into a place of ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’, and Jesus concluded with a rather puzzling statement:

*‘To all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away’.*

So what’s that all about?

Well, Jesus told the parable of the talents in the last week of his life on earth. He was already in Jerusalem, and within a few days the religious leaders would have their way, and he’d be hanging from a Roman cross. Those leaders – the so-called scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees - had received a whole lot from God. They’d been given the Law, the Temple, all the promises of God towards his chosen people. Many of them were financially secure too, and highly respected pillars of Jewish society. They were incredibly blessed. And with that blessing had come a responsibility: to make the very most of what they’d been given, and to live out their calling to love God, to love their neighbour, and to be a ‘light to lighten the Gentiles’. As we read elsewhere in the gospels, ‘from those to whom much has been given, much will be expected’.

So what had the leaders done with this amazing talent, this ridiculously vast sum of money? On one level they’d nurtured it, valued it, cherished it. They’d obeyed the Law to the letter – well, most of the time anyway; they’d taken good care of the Temple, even extending it massively during the days of Herod the Great; they’d ensured that all the rituals were properly followed, and all the sacrifices duly made. But here was the problem: that like Sarah-Jayne in The Apprentice they’d moved themselves into a ‘convenient place’; they’d consistently played safe and refused to take risks; they’d turned their backs on their very first calling to love and to be a light, because in the end it was easier to obey the various ‘Thou shalt nots’ in the Bible than to obey the ‘Thou shalts’ – and especially the greatest commandment of them all, that passionate commitment to love the Lord their God with all their heart and mind and soul and strength, and love their neighbour as themselves.

And so they’d kept their talent under wraps; they’d buried it in the ground; because only that way, they believed, could they live a ‘convenient’ life for themselves while also guaranteeing that the fearsome God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, wouldn’t be cross with them.

And in the end that would prove a disastrous mistake. For one thing, it would lead to them killing their own Messiah, because of the inconvenient challenge that Jesus posed for them. For another, it would lead to the destruction of their beloved Temple just forty years’ later, in one of the darkest periods of Israel’s history – a time in which weeping and gnashing of teeth would definitely become the order of the day. In this parable, in other words, Jesus was giving them one last chance to dig up their unique talent and to start to use it as he and his followers were beginning to do: to reconnect with their true calling to love and to be a light – to preach good news to the poor and bind up the broken hearted - and so to avert the coming disaster.

But the full meaning of Jesus’ parables can never be contained in a single moment of history. Because Jesus’ story of the talents reminds us of a really important truth for today: that as Christians we too have been given extraordinary gifts – Jesus and the gift of His Spirit, the Scriptures, prayer, our worldwide Christian family, ‘strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow’; and as Christians, we too have been chosen for a purpose; and the moment we forget both that blessing and that purpose – the moment we put our baptism and confirmation certificates safely away in the filing cabinet, and quietly forget about them – is a moment of real spiritual danger. For one day, this parable teaches, we will be called to give an account of our lives before Almighty God.

Our English word ‘talent’ as in ‘Britain’s got Talent’ comes from this very parable: but today it no longer means a unit of weight, of course, or a sum of money. It rather means a particular gift, or a series of gifts, that God (if we believe in God) has entrusted to us. And it’s true of our everyday lives, of course, that if we don’t use our talents but bury them in the ground – if we don’t practise the piano, say, or train for rugby, or work hard at school - those talents are in effect taken away from us. They wither on the vine. They may as well be given to someone else for all the use we’ve made of them.

But there’s a spiritual principle here too, that St Paul later spells out in his picture of the Body of Christ: that each one of us has been given a spiritual gift, or maybe several spiritual gifts – each one of us is like a part of the body, a hand perhaps or a foot, an eye or an ear; and if we fail to exercise those gifts, the whole of the rest of the body will suffer.

So think back to those first two servants in Jesus’ parable, summoned to the boardroom: the five-talent slave and the two-talent one. Both had used their initiative to put their talents to work, to exercise their gifts to the utmost. Both had doubled their master’s investment. And that should be aim too, not least as we look ahead to these coming weeks of lockdown, where some doors may be closed to us, yes, but others are wide open, as we do all we can to ‘love and serve the Lord’.

And think back too to the third servant, the one-talent one, who lived by the Shredded Wheat strapline, ‘Nothing added, nothing taken away’. For what this man had failed to recognise was this: that without risk – without a degree of enterprise, energy, boldness, initiative – we can never achieve anything for the Kingdom of God: that faith itself, as someone once put it, is spelt ‘RISK’; and so is hope, for that matter, and so is love.

That’s a challenge, of course, a challenge especially for those who instinctively like to take life easy and to play it safe. I don’t want to look an idiot. I don’t want to fail. I don’t like to stand up against bullying or dishonesty or discrimination in my workplace. I don’t want my friends to think I’m that I’m some sort of religious fanatic, indeed that I’m religious at all. I don’t want to give away a significant chunk of my income – after all, who knows when I might need it? I don’t want to engage with sensitive questions, like those raised by the ‘Living in Love and Faith’ resources issued earlier this week.

Yet the warning of the parable is this: that if we constantly play it safe with the gospel – if like Sarah-Jayne we ensure that it doesn’t become inconvenient for us - if we just keep it as a trophy or an insurance policy or a hobby like golf or stamp-collecting – then we’re gambling with our very souls. In trying to play safe, the bad servant was playing the most dangerous game of them all.

And so to some words that I haven’t said much over the past few months, as baptisms and confirmations have largely gone on hold – but words that could hardly be more relevant than they are today:

*Do not be ashamed of Christ. You are his forever. Stand bravely with him against all the forces of evil, and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life’. Amen.*