

This is a complex little parable, and one which lends itself to all sorts of interpretations and conclusions! Perhaps the most important thing to note about the three slaves in this story is that they are *stewards*. They are people who have been entrusted with the affairs of a king or an overlord, knowing that he will one day return and demand a reckoning. They have different levels of responsibility, but even the one with only one "talent" has a significant responsibility – his part of the master's wealth amounts to hundreds of thousands of dollars in contemporary terms. This is one trusting master!!

Now, imagine that you are going to attempt to achieve a 100% return on your investment – which is exactly what the first two slaves did. How are you going to do it? It has become distressingly obvious in recent times that big returns come from big risks.

Yet the third slave took no risk at all. The money was all locked away very safely. Why? The answer he gives is not that he was afraid of losing it, but that he was afraid because his master was "harsh". Perhaps more importantly, this harshness was not that the master would punish a servant who lost his money, but that the master "reaped where he did not sow, and gathered where he did not scatter seed". The third slave sees the master as, somehow, unjust. He returns the money with the words, "Here you have what is yours", as if to say, "You're not getting the benefit of any of my labour"; or "The fruits of what I do are mine, even if I gain them from what you have entrusted to me." And we know the master's angry response.

This is not a parable merely about using the gifts we have, whether they are great or small. It is not, that is, a simple moral tale about "bearing good fruit", to recall last week's gospel reading. It's a parable about the sovereignty, or kingship, of God. It reminds us that the world, and all that is in it, is God's. The master makes a claim on all which his slaves have, because they have nothing he has not already given to them. If

they prosper, it is because *he* has given them the means to prosper, and so he *is* able to do just as the third slave said – "reap where he did not sow, and gather where he did not scatter seed." The difference between the third slave and the first two slaves is not that the first two had more to play with, or even that they made a profit. The difference is that they were *free* to act with their master's possessions as he wished them to, because *they* had nothing invested in the outcome. Slave number three seems almost to resent that it his master who is really making the investment, and not he himself. He is punished because he would not risk losing to his master what he considered his own. And so in the end he lost the master who had provided him with all that he *really* needed. When he is thrown out into the "outer darkness", this slave got exactly what he wanted – *independence* from the one who possessed and provided all that was needed.

Today we mark one of several high points in the church's year. At the end of the current cycle of readings we come to the point of declaring that we have discovered that *Jesus* is "King", perhaps a rather out-dated confession these days, but one which still makes some sense to all who hear it. This kingship, however, is not simply a "belief" about Jesus, something to be added to the collection of things the church believes and (in our case) marks in the cycle of its year. To declare *Jesus* to be king is to say that, like the master in the parable, Jesus is the one from which all things come and to which all things return.

And this is said in contrast to other candidates for such status in our lives. Over the last six months we've made our way through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, not in any obvious sense a teaching about the Kingship of Jesus, and yet very much about who we are and where our worth comes from. Again and again the themes of righteousness, goodness, our actions and our attitudes have been raised, and, if we were to look back on each section we could recast what was heard and said about them in terms of where our

lives come from and where they are headed to. Are we self-made men and women, as we stand before God and stand before those around us? Is our strength in our ethical achievements, our good works, our piety, our perseverance, our wealth? Are our weaknesses simply the opposite of these – failures which we would hide from ourselves and from God, should it be at all possible? How can it be that the poor in spirit, the grieving, those hungering for justice and persecuted for righteousness' sake are *blessed*? How can it be that those who meet the commandments and tend to the demands of religious piety are *nevertheless* found not to be in the right before God? The subtle temptation in resolving these tensions is interiorise things by proposing that what really matters is our intentions, our sincerity. And, in this way, in fact we do declare that we *are* self-made, for we imagine that if we are sincere enough surely God will honour us.

Now, let good intentions and good works continue, of course. But let them roll down as a stream within the banks of God's grace and mercy. The first two stewards in our parable really started with nothing but the love and trust of their master, and ended with "only" more of that love and trust, and that was enough for them. The master is the true lord in this matter, and what happens begins and ends with him.

Perhaps we might postulate a fourth steward, given whatever amount we like to nominate, who goes earnestly into the market place and, despite his very best efforts, loses it all, having even less than Number Three to present back to their harsh master. And then let us imagine that at the time of reckoning he stands before the master and declares, "I know that you are one who reaps where you do not sow, and gather where you did not scatter seed. But I am not much of an investor, and I made many mistakes. For all that you gave me to work with, I am forced to return to you empty handed, having failed you".

What do you say? How shall the master deal with him?

When the church declares that "*Jesus* is King", the emphasis falls on the "*Jesus*", and not on the "King" By "King" is invoked a sovereign freedom to do as one wishes; by

"Jesus" is invoked a demonstrated desire to embrace not only those who fail in their lives and ethics, but who fail *God himself* in those errors. It is because what we start with and what we finish with both belong to God that we might be freed of the fear of the harsh master. This is not a freedom to do as we wish, for this remains a path to death – and we've already noted that the fearful, resentful third steward gets just what his actions implied he wanted: independence from the master who owned all things, and so life in the "outer darkness". But if *Jesus* is king – if what we have and where we finish is something for which he takes ultimate responsibility – then ours is a joy-giving freedom from anxiety about getting it wrong, and being judged for it.

To make the point again: the first two stewards in our parable really started with nothing but the love and trust of their master, and ended not with great profits but with "only" more of that love and trust, and that was enough for them. Our invented fourth servant started with the same and, perhaps unexpectedly, found that he finished up as the first two did. At least, if he is able to stand before master without fear of judgement, and without judgement of the master as "harsh", he may trust in the love which first trusted him.

As we seek to do what good we can with whatever God has given us, may we too, find it enough to do what we can, and leave the rest to the God who can work all things for good, for those who trust him and those who allow all that they are, and have, and do, to be found in him.

By the grace of God, Amen.