

Hiding our talents

'In this place, gentlemen,
we need only concern ourselves with the man
who had just one talent!'
quipped the master of Trinity College,
taking the usual Cambridge dim view
of the promise of his undergraduates.

Actually one talent was not to be sneezed at,
but was worth a small fortune.

You remember those exercise books of old,
with all those wonderful tables and conversions on the back?
Rods in an acre,
furlongs in a mile,
ergs in a kilowatt,

braincells in a tabloid:

it was another language, another world
which fired my imagination.

Had I had a Hebrew exercise book,
it would no doubt have informed me
that one talent equalled ten thousand denarii.
And one denarius was the minimum daily wage
a labourer would receive:
enough to keep the wolf from the door.

One talent then was equivalent to 10,000 working days,
about thirty years,
in other words a lifetime's labour.

My grandad worked for thirty years at Donkins,
the steelworks in Chesterfield,
rising daily at 5.30 am,
coming home twelve hours later,

black with soot and exhausted:
a life sentence for thirty years,
a life's labour: a talent.

So let's not belittle
the man with one talent.

It represented a small fortune,
in fact quite a big fortune
his life's labour,
retirement and leisure at a stroke.

We can hear the parable at several levels.

It is an eschatological parable,
a parable about the Lord, the Lord!
going away and coming back again,
and weighing up how his servants
have used the gifts he graciously bestowed on them.

You can give it several settings.

The Lord coming back to **you** and saying

'What have you done with the life
and the treasures I left you with?'

The Lord coming to his Church and saying,

'What have you done with the life
and the treasures I left you with?'

The Lord coming to this nation,
this great nation and saying,

'What have you done with the life
and the treasures I left you with?'

And which of us, if we're honest,

doesn't have a glimpse of dreadful judgement,

of darkness and a wailing and gnashing of teeth,

an image which unfortunately always makes me think

of Mr Hackett's dental surgery down Bondgate

when the lights have failed.

But there are other strands to the parable.
The whole business of what a talent means.
How do we employ a lifetime, our lifetime?
We are here, this morning, alive.
Our life is the most precious thing,
really the only thing, that God has given us.
So much,
a brain, a body which can run rings round
the most sophisticated computer or ipod or robot.
Do we bury it,
or this day do we give praise to God
for this wonderful gift of life,
and make the most of it with every cell of our being?

I'm intrigued by the concept of talent,
being equal to thirty years hard labour, hard graft.
Of course in ancient times

a talent was just a massive unit of currency.
But in our time it has different connotations.
A talent is a superb skill
which seems to come from nowhere,
an Einstein, a Mozart, a Newton,
a genius in their respective sphere,
a gift from the gods,
or rather a gift from the only God.

We talk about talents and people being talented,
we all know we've got talents of our own,
but I think we undervalue them.
We never equate them with a lifetime's labour.
Many people have a linguistic talent,
are fluent in several languages.
But is that talent locked away in a cupboard
and just used for the occasional holiday abroad,

'The mist is low on the mountains today, Herr Grubbe!'

Or do we glory in that talent?

In my last parish I ran a NT Greek class,

and at the end of the year

we had a dozen people

reading the Gospels in their original language.

Marvellous!

The Old Testament was written originally in Hebrew,

the Apocrypha and New Testament in Koine Greek,

why can't we use our talent to learn those languages,

to hear God in the original

rather than second or third or fourth hand?

I'm no Hebraist,

but every time I struggle through a Hebrew verse,

and a verse will take me most of the morning

I feel I'm coming home,

employing my talents as they were meant to be employed.

But enough of languages.

My first love is Mathematics.

Tackling any Maths problem at any time, any place,

is for me like coming home, coming home to a talent.

Except that's not quite true.

When I was teenager, A level Maths problems terrified me.

I looked at an equation and panicked and thought,

'Gosh, how on earth can I solve this,'

and as I panicked the terrible spectre rose up,

failing my Maths A Level,

not getting to where I wanted to get,

staying at home, a saddo,

incarcerated in my dad's vicarage for ever and ever. Amen

At least now I've got my own Vicarage!

I remember my Math's teacher, Mr Underwood,
being the epitome of calmness,
'Let's try this, it might not work,
but let's try it for a bit of fun.

No, that's not right. So let's try this then.'

But I was far from calm.

I was afraid.

I was afraid of failure.

I didn't trust in my talent.

Like our man in the parable was afraid.

'I was afraid,'

he says to his Lord,

a Lord spitting with venom and fury.

'I was afraid, so I hid the talent rather than use it.'

He was frightened of his master,

a hard man,
so the fear locked him,
stopped any growth,
made him do nothing.

Fear is a self-fulfilling prophecy
and forces you to stay where you are,
stop still in your tracks,
hoping that the past and present
will somehow cocoon you from the future.

In our Gospel story,
the servant who is afraid
is roundly condemned for burying his talent

'Be not be afraid,'

the Gospel shouts out at us.

'You've no need to be frightened.'

All this credit crunch stuff

is basically caused by fear,
everyone hiding their money
rather than letting it work.

Two final comments on this particular parable.

The value of your investment can go down as well as up,
it says in the small print.

I wonder what the reaction of the Lord
would have been to the servant who used the talent
and only retained a fraction of its value or lost it altogether.

I suspect the Lord can cope
with people who step out and succeed,
or step out and spectacularly fail.

I suspect he can't cope very well
with those who don't step out at all.

And that Lord, that Master in the parable

simply doesn't square with the picture of
God our loving Father,
the picture of God as Abba, as Daddy,
which Jesus presents us with so boldly.

I want to say,

the kingdom of heaven is not like this despot
who reaps where he does not sow
and gathers where he does not scatter.

God is the other way around.

From the first day of creation until the present
he has sown and sown and sown
but disappointingly found no fruit to reap,
has graciously and liberally scattered,
but found, to his eternal disappointment, nothing to gather.

We have no need to be afraid of our real Lord,
the bountiful, the ever merciful,
the ever accepting, the ever forgiving.

We have no need to be afraid of him.

In fact being afraid of him,

burying our talent through fear

is driven through lack of faith

in the God Jesus revealed to us.

My God's a bit like Mr Underwood, my maths teacher.

'Don't panic. Don't be frightened.

Let's try this. It might not work,

it's just a game. And if it doesn't work,

there are lots of other things we can try.'

George 6th's Christmas Broadcast

as dark the storms of war brooded over the world

seem appropriate as we stand bewildered by this morning's

parable and our present situation:

'I said to the man

who stood at the gate of the year,

"Give me a light,

that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied,

"Go out into the darkness,

and put your hand into the hand of God.

That shall be to you better, far better than light,

and safer than the known way,

safer than any known way.

Amen.