

Just and merciful Father, fill us with your Spirit as we strive to bring Jesus into our lives. Amen

- My grandfather worked in insurance for the whole of his adult life. He specialized in insuring property in America and retired in 1961, the year before I was born. One of the things of his I have is a little book, fully illustrated with black and white photographs, rather like an early tourist pamphlet, engagingly entitled '100 conflagrations since 1900.' It majors on the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, which was the US insurance market nemesis. The biggest disaster in living memory when my grandfather was working.
- You may know that San Francisco, and indeed much of California lies on the San Andreas fault line and is therefore subject to regular earthquakes, some of which are more destructive than others. It is indisputable that there will, at some point, be another huge earthquake in that region causing huge destruction and loss of life and which will have a major impact on the world economy. Whether it will be 250 years away or tomorrow is impossible to predict.
 - Yet people still build and live there and the population rises relentlessly. What is it, I wonder, that makes human beings look at life in the short term so much, rather than planning for the future?
- I also wonder if our readings this morning, the first of which at least should send shock waves through our psyche, like the alarming tremors of an earthquake, are addressing this question? But let's look at the Parable of the Talents first.
- Some people love this parable. In my experience they are usually teachers and parents who want to use it as a way of saying, 'Jesus wants you to use your talents and work hard'. If you can't be bothered you'll never get anywhere in life. Salvation by works.
- Conversely, other people detest it because they see it as an argument for bolstering up the capitalist regime. Work hard for your boss. Engage in trade and make a large profit. The larger the better. 5 talents profit is rewarded more than 2 talents. Money is good. Those who have will get more. Those who have not will be squashed further. That's the way of the Kingdom of God. It must be. Jesus said so! Salvation by works.
- Unsurprisingly, I want to suggest a third way of engaging with the parable and actually I think it all comes down what we mean by talents.
- You may know that a talent in biblical time was a huge amount of money, roughly equivalent to 15 years' wages.
- So if we equate that to today's values and look at average wages, the slave with one talent was handed something in the region of £400 000, and the slave with 5 talents, a whopping £2 million. That's ludicrous and would have pointed out for the Jews the outrageous nature of the story. It was not to be interpreted literally!
- And we get our modern meaning of the word talent, as in 'He's talented at playing the piano', from the parable which I suggest leads us up the wrong track.
- But if we are not talking about talents as 'using the gifts God has given us', what can it mean?
- I want to suggest that when Jesus is actually talking about the loan of money to the slaves, he is actually challenging us to consider the way we look at the world.
 - Because, you see, the ancient Rabbis commend Jews who bury their money in the ground. It preserves it and keeps it safe. It stops other people from getting their filthy gentile hands on it.
- The Jews listening to Jesus tell the story would therefore not have thought there was anything wrong with the slave who *'dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money'*. However they would have deeply disapproved of the master's suggestion that the slave *'ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.'* Only the Gentiles paid interest.
- There may be a criticism here of a world view that is so protective of what we have that we will not ever risk engaging with people outside our own safe circle. That can extend to the way we allow our faith to affect our life, just as much as how we spend our money or even about how we act during an infectious global pandemic.
- 'We can't leave the church open in case somebody comes in and vandalises it.' But we have discovered it's much better to manage the risk and give the opportunity.

- I'm not giving to charity because they might waste some of it on administration. They don't seem to have transparent accountability. It's amazing how many people use this as an excuse to give nothing at all.
- I'm really anxious about meeting other people at the moment and getting Covid. And we are seeing people who are so concerned about their physical health that they sacrifice their mental health.
 - Did you notice the sense of anxiety in the slave who hid the money? *“Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid.”*
- Anxiety is one of the most corrosive emotions of today. Those of you who are plagued with it know just how easy it is to give in to it. And it's expensive in terms of exhaustion and self-will to stand up against it. Remember we're talking about £400 000 here. Jesus was in no doubt about the cost of what he was asking.
- The other two slaves managed their anxiety, took some risks and were praised for it.
- All this takes place in the shadow of the cross. In the very next chapter, Jesus is arrested and in a matter of hours later he was dead. The tension was high as he was telling the parable and the stakes were huge. Perhaps that why he talks about such exorbitant amounts of money.
 - Jesus was living on a faultline that was about to crack!
- That faultline, that sense of impending doom is painted, oh so terrifyingly clearly, by Zephaniah in our first reading. *‘Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD’s wrath; in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.’*
- Zephaniah is criticizing people whose world view is about achieving a comfortable lifestyle so they don't have to feel anxiety. Putting their trust in security if you like, rather than in God. *‘At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, ‘The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm.’ Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste.’*
- And that could easily be a comment on our age, and the large number of people who think God will not act. *‘The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm.’* And you and I would be mad if we did not think that we too are living on a faultline at the moment as climate change begins to bite deep. We have not taken the opportunity to move away from the danger and now it is probably too late.
- So what world view can we live by that will help in our own particular faultline? How can we be like the slave who had the 5 talents? The multimillion dollar prize! Here's three ideas.
- Maybe it is by living as ethically as we can, not by keeping ourselves away from the society of which we are part, but rather by making decisions about how to engage with it. What to buy. Who to support. When to speak out. Judging our decision by the amount of positive good we are able to do rather than by whether we consider them 'right' or 'wrong'.
 - And these decisions are normally about things as simple as which toilet tissue you buy or where to go on holiday rather than far reaching lifestyle choices.
- You could say this is incarnation. Allowing God, through our lives to come close to his beloved world.
- Maybe it is about challenging fear and anxiety when we see it creeping up in our thoughts and words. Fighting against letting anxiety or worry stopping you do something you think is worthwhile. As we said, this is a worldview that is costly but valuable. Ask Jesus to walk beside you and strengthen you. Picture his love for you as he hung on the cross. And remember the liberation that comes from realising that even death could not hold him down. Not surprisingly, you could say that this is about allowing salvation into your life.
- And maybe it is about holding onto a worldview that God's expansive love for his creation will ensure that he will save it, despite the damage we do to it,. He may not save us from the immediate effects of climate change, but he will save his creation from destruction and restore the balance that we have put out of kilter.
- We have the biblical hope that heaven and earth are very close together and like Jesus after the travails of life on earth in pandemic, climate change, economic downturn and global instability, we have the sure hope of the Kingdom of God where Jesus has prepared a place for us. That's allowing the ascension into our lives.
- Remember the master has entrusted his slaves with these great riches. Are you going to play with them or hide them?