

Matthew 25 14-30

Years ago I picked up a novel that a bookshop thought I should read: *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. It had won a Pulitzer Prize. There was one of those cajoling hand written notes saying that this was a book you must not miss. I read it and I enjoyed it; it is beautifully written and the sorrow in the story says with you, a dying non-conformist minister, in 1957 looking back on his life and ministry in Iowa. Yet, when I put *Gilead* down, I was pretty sure I had missed something. I had not quite *got* it. And that feeling has nagged away at me ever since, a bit of unfinished business; the frustrating conviction that there was more than knew.

This week Marilynne Robinson has published a new novel *Lila* and I have just read a review. *Lila* turns out to be the third in a trilogy of which *Gilead* was the first. That was news to me and goes some way to explaining my difficulty. There is indeed more to it. But, there was something more. The review had some interesting things to say - it pointed out that, at the end of *Gilead* the dying minister writes a final sentence,

“I’ll pray, and then I’ll sleep.

Now I remembered that sentence, it felt rather wistful, slightly resigned. But its real significance had completely passed me by. I did not know that

“I’ll pray, and then I’ll sleep.

is a quotation from King Lear, Act III, Scene 4. In the middle of the storm Lear and his companions find shelter and suddenly, the old King realises that he has failed to do this all his life, he has failed to look after those in his care. It is the moment in the play when Lear begins to work out his redemption. He understands his mistake, he changes. Now, when you know that; when you know that Ames, the minister in *Gilead* who has been dry and unaffectionate all his life, dies quoting King Lear; well then the book reads differently. The book is suddenly all about lost opportunity and regret, about religion that has not done what religion should.

Which is a long winded way of saying that you have to read carefully when you read. References and allusions matter. You have to read really carefully, you must do that when you read scripture.

it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one

It is a very famous parable and famously everyone looks at the floor when it is read because it is so peculiar.

Let’s start with where it fits in, because that is interesting and informative. We heard Matthew’s version of the parable. Immediately before this parable Matthew has Jesus telling another parable, the one about the bridesmaids. Immediately afterwards Matthew has Jesus talking about separating the sheep from the goats. So, Matthew thinks this is all about the moment a judgement is made. The bridegroom arrives and finds dopey bridesmaids who have run out of oil, the Lord of all divides the righteous and the unrighteous, the rich man returns and finds his servants have invested badly. It is a story about judgement.

In Luke's gospel, this story gets told just after the splendid story of Zacchaeus the rich tax collector who repents and gives his money away. That is the story that ends

Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham
Luke 19:9

So the context here has something to do with making the right decisions well, living well (as opposed to dying well). Immediately after the parable Luke tells the story of Jesus entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. Told in this way the parable begins to sound as though it might be about the fact that we stand very close to salvation, the moment Jesus praises Zacchaeus, the moment Jesus enters into the city. What will we do with that knowledge, how will we live wisely and make the right sort of decision, like Zacchaeus?

Now for the parable of the talents itself.

to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one

When we hear the word talent we think about a unique ability to tap dance while making porridge, or an unusual facility to play the spoons. We think about what we are good at and how much we achieve. That is not what is meant here. A talent is a sum of money, a talent in fact is what a labourer could expect to earn in fifteen years. It is a *lot* of money. Five talents would have tears of joy running down the Chapter Clerk's cheeks; she could repair the heating, give the choir a bonus and arrange a Chapter awayday in the Seychelles.

You have to read carefully. This is not a story about investment and banking. It is not all about what you do with a few pounds. We hear the words and that is what we tend to think

'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents

The sums of money, though, beggar belief. This is a story about a master who has riches beyond imagining and trusts his servants with far more than is good for them. We are supposed to start on the back foot, wondering what on earth is going on.

This story is about the size and scale of living in the world, it is about the height and depth, the possibilities of failure and success. So, we hear

a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them;

In the bible the man who goes on a journey, or the king who will be coming back is nearly always code for a story that started a while ago and is yet to be concluded. It is code for the story that God tells, the one that begins with us losing our way in Eden and wandering in a wilderness looking for our way home. This is really not story about George Osborne and the Governor of the Bank of England. It is a story about the living God.

God has given us gifts, the gifts, the possibilities beggar belief. We can land robots on comets six billion kilometres away. We can paint the Sistine Chapel, compose the *Missa Papae Marcelli* and we can invent poison gas and decide use it. The possibilities are immense.

to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away

What are we going to do with the possibilities before us? It is at this point, I think, that the parable gets really interesting and quite clever. We can be brave, bold and ambitious

The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents

We can be more cautious

In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents

And that is the sort of choice we understand. Is it the language of *The Apprentice* and endless talent shows. How big is the dream? How great is the ambition? We behave as though we live between the possibility of ambition, or caution. In the parable of the talents, however, there is a third option, the man who buries the money in the ground, treats it like a corpse, sees no chance of life. The real temptation, when the possibilities are enormous, frightening, overwhelming, is to pull the duvet over your head and pretend it is not your responsibility. The great temptation is not to think about it all. Threatened simply by the job of living, the easiest thing is to pretend that the decisions I make do not matter, pretend that ethics is what they have to worry about in hospitals and courts, pretend that votes make no difference, pretend that I do not need to know, still less care what is happening in Syria or Sierra Leone. The temptation is to make life bearable by forgetting that it really matters.

In Gilead the old minister dies surrounded by regret. They say that is how most of us die. It is because the possibilities are so great and so alarming. It is because we choose to pretend that the present moment is not freighted with the possibilities of eternity. It is because we find it simpler, and a lot more comfortable, to forget that we stand in the presence of God.

We all do this to some extent. The parable of the talents is not a reminder that we will be judged, though it is true that we will. It is a lesson in perspective, where we stand, what matters. This week you and I should commit ourselves to recovering just a little of the sense that this moment, and what I do with it, really matters. Make that donation to charity, see the person I have been putting off, read the news, write a letter. This parable is a challenge to see the beginnings of great possibilities in the present moment. It is the challenge to live in this moment as though it is the beginning of eternity.