



November 19th

THE NEW SHOFAR

give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you Luke 6:38

God does not stint on pouring out his graces

Sometimes the Spirit opens up new insights into old stories as I discovered with today's Gospel reading about the talents. Let us begin first of all with the ***talent***. It was a measure of weight that could vary in size up to 58+ kilos, depending on what was being weighed – silver, copper, gold. The value varied a bit from place to place but for our parable it simply means a great deal, an enormously large volume.

Traditionally, interpreters have understood these to refer to personal gifts from God, abilities, talents and even the gift of the Spirit. **For Chrysostom** (d.407 AD) the talents represent *each person's ability, whether in the way of protection, or in money, or in teaching, or whatever*. We have all been gifted in various ways by God and whatever the level or volume of gift, we will be called upon to account for how we used these "talents".

the End-of-time Judgment

At this end of his Gospel, the evangelist sets his mind to the End Time. This is the focus of chapter 24. Matthew's eschatological (end time) material has a dual purpose. First, it is fundamentally part of his narrative about Jesus, presenting him as the heavenly king and judge. Secondly, it is presented as a motivation for his disciples. Matthew, like all followers of Jesus, did not have first-hand experience of the end of the age. For that reason, he resorts to images and parables to depict it. He presents two possible fates for people, heaven or the fires of hell. Those wishing to enjoy the eternal joy and blessings at what he envisages as being a heavenly banquet put on by the Father, need to be faithful to the commands and teachings of Jesus. There is a pattern of discipleship they need to take up, a pattern to be found across the entire Gospel. Faith needs to be lived out.

The talents are gifts for the world not just the servant

When we read this Gospel story, we are limited by our western perspective. A Jew at the time Matthew was writing would have been struck by the enormous weight of what was given to the servants. No one could lift that weight! But note this: **weight** was very much associated with the glory of God (*doxa-Greek*). ***Kabod*** is the Hebrew word for glory; it literally means "**weight**." The glory of God is the **weight** of all that God is, the fullness of his understanding, virtue, and happiness. God's perfect love, power, wisdom, sovereignty, and grace make him glorious and were conceived of as his **weight**. Pointing others to the majesty of God and witnessing to God's glory turns believers into God-glorifiers. This experience of divine glory is what God invites the followers (disciples) of his Son to share.

God's glory (*weight*) is found in the Temple, seated on the throne of mercy inside the area called the holy of holies. The greatest weight (glory), then, is the mercy of God, which existed in infinite, inexhaustible abundance in the Holy Temple.

God's glory and the parable of the talents

Keeping this in mind we can now go back to the parable of the talents and perhaps discern a new aspect to what Jesus was teaching. The talents given to the three servants are not so much monetary gifts or personal capacities; they are a share in the mercy of God, a participation in the "weightiness" of the divine love. They are offered a fullness of life previously unknown and beyond all human comprehension. But since mercy is always directed to the other, these "talents" are designed to be shared. They will only increase in benefit according to the measure that they are given away. They were not offered for the benefit of the person receiving them. They were gifts to be shared.

The problem with the timid servant who buried his talent is not that he was an ineffective businessman but that he fundamentally misunderstood the nature of what he had been given. The divine mercy—received as a pure gift—is meant to be given away to others as a pure gift. Buried in the ground, that is to say, hugged tightly to himself as his own possession, such a talent necessarily fades away and is lost. This is why the master's harsh words should not be read as the punishment of an angry God but as an expression of spiritual physics: the divine mercy will grow in you only inasmuch as you share it out to others. To share in the *kabod* Yahweh, the *glory* of God, requires us to give it away, to share it with others that their lives may be enhanced.

The example that comes to mind here is the most famous of all of Jesus' parables, namely, the story of the Prodigal Son. Using a term that also carried a monetary sense in ancient times, the younger son says, "Father, give *me my* share of the substance or wealth that is coming to *me*. Notice how in one sentence, the son manages to mention himself three times! The father in that parable gives away all that he has, for that is who he is. It is what he does. The foolish son squanders the money in short order. The spiritual lesson is the same: the divine glory, divine self is a gift and it can be possessed only inasmuch as it becomes a gift for others. When we try to cling to it as a possession, something in which we alone delight, it disappears. It grows only inasmuch as it is being shared.

Disciples are called so that they can be sent

The third servant is the easiest one for readers to understand. They are the Christians whose faith does not extend too much further than the walls of their Sunday worship. They are like the children of Israel of whom the prophets spoke. They would walk past the poor and starving at the temple gates as they enter in for prayer and worship. God did not want their sacrifice. What he wanted was mercy, not sacrifice; love not more bullocks to be burned up on the altars. For the parable, what God demands of us is that we share the mercy and love he has showered on us, share with those we meet along the way. We are to be the hands and feet of God, His ears listening to the cries of the poor. We are God's mouth announcing forgiveness and compassion, the eyes of God seeing in others the divine spark that is the divine image and likeness. We who have been given much are expected to give much. Nothing less than our very lives will be considered acceptable.