SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 15, 2026 **Festal Eucharist**
The Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost 11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner
on
Psalm 90:1-8, 12; Matthew 25:14-30

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'So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.'

Psalm 90:12

This time last year, I was attending the annual Venison Feast of the Company of Merchant Adventurers of York. You may remember the centennial of the official twinning of 'old' York and New York a few years ago that we hosted, and attended by a number of members of that Guild including the current and former Governors of that company. The Company still uses it original Guild Hall – the oldest such hall in constant use by its original owners in England – completed in 1361. As the name suggests, it is a fellowship of people who have ventured far and wide, including overseas, making money for the City and environs of York through trading. Their work was the origins of the phrase *adventure capital.* Interestingly, though, from its very beginning, the Yorkshire merchants and adventurers trading overseas also provided a hospital and a chapel for the poor in their hall. Hold on to that thought, because I think it might help us as we reflect on today's readings.

The parables of Jesus are not simple constructs and they do not all follow the same rules. They are certainly not a version of *Aesops* Fables, and they are not all allegory either. Jesus uses examples of the things of everyday life, but in order to get his hearers to think – for the parables often have a twist at the end. For example, the parable we heard today is *not* a manual of how to be successful in adventure capital by Our Lord Jesus Christ! In fact, I believe that it has very little to do with investments and the creation of wealth; neither is it to do with grasping overlords demanding that their money be invested and traded wisely. So what is it all about? Well, first, we need to set the context.

This parable is placed in Matthew's Gospel as part of a series of teaching and parables concerned with the end times – with judgement and, in the case of the New Testament, with the second coming of Christ. The Greek word is *eschaton* which means 'the last' from which we derive the theological study of the last things – or, *eschatology.*

Chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew's Gospel are concerned with the last things; of being awake; of being ready and watchful. Beginning with a prophecy of the destruction of the Temple, we hear descriptions of an apocalyptic end and the coming of the Son of Man, and the expectations that God has while people are awaiting his return.

Last week, if we had not celebrated Remembrance Sunday, we would have heard the parable of the bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom; five were wise and brought extra oil for their lamps, but five

were foolish and did not. Next week, this eschatological section of Matthew's Gospel culminates with the parable of the King separating the sheep from the goats and what Mother Teresa of Calcutta used to describe as 'the Gospel on five fingers' – you-did-it-to-me.

So, firstly, today's parable is about *end things* and *what to do while you are waiting* not simply about the wise use of money. The word 'talent' also confuses us for, since the middle-ages, the word has come to be used for describing a gift or an aptitude that someone has, like playing a musical instrument, or painting, or dancing, or being a great soccer player. But, again, we need to go back to the first century. The Greek word for talent is a form of measurement, specifically *weight* and it is a fabulous amount! So, if you are good at mental math, you can do this! A talent is around 6000 dinarii, and one denarius was a common laborer's daily wage. So, assuming laborers had at least one Sabbath day's rest a week plus holy days, one talent is approximately 15-20 years' worth of wages! But wait! The man going on a journey at the beginning of the parable gives *five* talents to the first slave – that's roughly 75-100 years of wages! Now you begin to realize that this parable has nothing to do with making money – just as, for example, the Parable of the Sower is not a Farmers guide to efficient crop production or the Parable of the Prodigal son is about inheritance. Jesus uses parables to challenge; he uses everyday things that his hearers would know about, but he provides twists and turns to even shock them into thinking more deeply.

N.T. Wright loves to remind people that these parables of the end times cannot be separated from the Hebrew Scriptures understanding of God's relationship to Israel and his presence in the Temple. At the time of the exile to Babylon the prophets described the Lord God leaving the Temple – Ezekiel has a vision of the glory departing. But God still was with his chosen people and, importantly, the prophets talked about his return to them. We heard this in our Old Testament lesson, when Zephaniah said '*the day of the Lord is at hand... The great day of the Lord is near.*'

These powerful themes of going away but returning are at the heart of today's parable and, indeed, of the parables earlier in chapter 24, and the parable we will hear next week which, significantly, is on the Feast of Christ the King.

So, the man goes on a journey and Jesus says that he was away 'a long time.' But the man had entrusted things to his servants. When God left the Temple at the exile, and the Temple was destroyed, the people were still entrusted with the keeping of the Law – the Torah. When the Lord God returned to his Temple, would he find a people who had been faithful to his Law? The Law was, after all, a covenant relationship between God and his people. It was the means by which Israel knew that they were God's chosen people.

The man comes back. The first slave has not been idle – he had doubled his master's money! The second slave, likewise, also had a remarkable return on investments. It is the third slave that causes us discomfort; for, after all, he had not lost anything that the man had entrusted to him. And before you think it was foolish of him to bury the talent in a field, that was a common practice in the Old Testament and at the time of Jesus – after all, doesn't Jesus tell another parable about treasure buried in a field? So why is the man so angry? We are told that the third servant was fearful of him but I think that misses the point, for Jesus then says something quite shocking in asking the slave why he has not at least put the money in the bank and earned interest – something forbidden in the Torah! Again, perhaps this is not about money or rewards but, rather, responsibility and attentiveness. Remember, this whole section of Matthew's Gospel can be summed up in phrases that Jesus repeats during in Chapters 24 and 25: *"You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."* (Matthew 24:44) And, *"Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."* (Matthew 25:13)

In the New Testament Church, following the Ascension of Jesus, his disciples expected him to return soon. As weeks became months, and months became years, and years became millennia – the church, nevertheless, continued to reflect on these parables of Jesus. Jesus would return but what should we be doing in the meantime? Will we be like the first two servants, or the third servant who was severely chastised by the returning owner of the talents. It's like a birthday card I once received that had an image of Jesus knocking on the door. At the bottom were the words, *"Jesus is coming...look busy!"* The third servant buried the treasurer – it was safe, but it was of no use to anyone, including its owner.

Each of us has been entrusted with something precious – a vast wealth – what is it? It is the good news of the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ. And it is the opportunity to build a beloved community where his love radiates and touches the lives of others. You could say that our church's mission statement is an attempt to live the parable of the talents by worshipping, loving, and serving Our Lord Jesus Christ. It is not enough to bury that treasure even if it keeps it safe. It is like the pharisees at the time of Jesus who became so obsessed with the words of the law that they forget the origins of the law – that it was about building a loving relationship with God and with one's neighbor; the law was to be *used* not protected from others having access to it. In our Epistle reading, Paul encourages the Thessalonians, and uses those same sentiments of the Lord – of watchfulness, of mindfulness, and of active engagement:

> *For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*

So, I am back to the origins of the Guild Hall for the Company of Merchant Adventurers of York – and their provision for the poor and for the sick – active engagement with those around them. It is exactly the same sentiments as we find in our Neighbor to Neighbor project, which is but a small way that parishioners and supporters can gather together to try to make a difference; to put their 'talent' (as in the extraordinary gift that God has given them) to good use. It's not enough to pay someone else to do it, or to expect someone else to do it for us; it is the means by which we enter into the joy of the Lord.

Some words of Archbishop Oscar Romero:

> *I am glad, brothers and sisters, that our Church is persecuted precisely for its preferential option for the poor and for trying to become incarnate on behalf of the poor. And I want to say to all of the people, to rulers, to the rich and powerful: If you do not become poor, if you do not concern yourselves for the poverty of our people as though they were your own family, you will not be able to save society"* (Sermon preached on 15 July 1979)

Or, as the choir sang at the end of our psalm today, **So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.**