

#772 Where is Jesus in the “Talents” Parables? An Angle on the Passion

Colleagues,

By rights all Holy Week sermons will be ready to go by the time you get this. And that's too bad either for you or for the preacher you like to bless with the latest stuff from Thursday Theology. Tonight's post showed up in our editors' mailbox about five days ago. It came from Pr. Ted Schroeder, who must be so habituated by now to being identified as Ed's younger brother that he won't mind too much when we do that here. I wish we could have gotten this to you two weeks ago. You'll understand why when you read it. If nothing else, tuck it away for reference next year when the preps for passion preaching are still in the early thinking stages.

God grant fresh faith and insight to saints in Christ the world o'er the next few days.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

The Parables of the Talents and the Stewards in Luke 19 and Matthew 25 Ted Schroeder, 2013

June 1988 – I was in San Jose, Costa Rica, with people from Europe, Australia, and North America and South America. We had been visiting base communities in Guatemala, El Salvador, and

Nicaragua. Now in Costa Rica we were debriefing. An Anglican from Australia led morning devotions. Someone read Luke 19:11-28. Then Fr. Donald Carrington stood up to preach. He said something like, "I've spent most of my ministry among Aboriginals in northern Australia. When they read this story of the nobleman who had become a king, they say, 'Now there is one bad bloke.'" (Shortest sermon I've ever heard.) There was a stir throughout the group. We got it; this was not a parable about "God is sovereign" and "use your talents." Jesus was teaching about speaking truth to power and paying the price for doing so, just as the base communities we visited were doing—both speaking out and paying the price.

In Luke this parable occurs just before Jesus enters Jerusalem (Palm Sunday). Luke wrote that Jesus decides to tell this story because he perceives that his followers thought that the "reign of God was about to happen immediately." This story should be front and center as we enter Passiontide, helping the Church journey with Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross.

The Matthew 25 version of this story is brief: An unnamed man is going on a journey. Departing, he entrusts his business to three servants. Upon his return his servants report doubling the value of what had been placed in their care, except for the third servant who calls the master a scoundrel and informs him that he has done nothing but keep the funds secure. "Here's your dough. You're a kleptomaniac."

It has been our custom to identify the master with God and to accept the man's pronouncement that the servant was wicked and lazy. We have said that the servant's criticism of his master is invalid and that, even if it were true that the master took stuff he was not entitled to, it showed how mysterious God is and that we have no business judging the sovereign God. So we drew three "truths" from the parable: 1) Respect the sovereign

God. 2) Use productively the talents/gifts God gives you. 3) There will be rewards and punishments.

Luke presents four significant additions to the story line.

1. In Luke, the man though still nameless is called a nobleman, which we interpreted to mean 'honorable,' an unfortunate translation. High born or born in the lap of luxury would be a better rendering of the Greek in this instance.
2. The high-born man distributes his property for ten servants to manage while he goes not just on a journey (a la Matthew), but travels to a distant country in order to receive "kingly power."
3. The people of the nobleman's community despise him and send delegates to the far country to lobby against his receiving a kingship.
4. When the nobleman returns as king, he orders the execution of all those who opposed him.

We have consistently ignored the fact that Luke's version is precisely a chapter from the life of Herod the Great, who had gone to Rome and schmoozed for perhaps two years in order to obtain the kingship of Palestine. Jerusalem Pharisees had sent a protest delegation to Rome. People were executed when Herod returned as king. Some commentators mention this coincidence but drop it, finding no significance in it.

Later, upon the death of the elder Herod, the scenario was repeated by three of his sons—Antipas, Philip, and Archelaus—who travelled to Rome and lobbied as rivals for the same kingly authority. Again Jerusalem sent its protest. Again more people died in Jerusalem in the aftermath.

COMMENTS and QUESTIONS GROWING OUT OF THE LUKE PARABLE

- A. Since the Luke parable reads like history which Jesus' hearers had to have known, I find it impossible to think that they would have understood the parable as we have traditionally interpreted it.
- B. If the common people of a community say that a high-born person in their community is a scoundrel, shouldn't the reader at least consider the possibility that the folks are right?
- C. Why have we concluded that the nobleman is God and that the people are simply showing how stubbornly they are stuck in their sin? How could Jesus have meant to imply and how could his hearers have inferred that the Herods were models for God?
- D. When the nobleman-now-king rewards the steward who gained ten-for-one by appointing him ruler over ten towns, does the name Decapolis come to mind? Imagine this: all the people in the community believe that this king is a scoundrel, and you—steward #1—are going to rule the Decapolis for him. The king murders all his detractors without due process and you are willing to serve in his administration?
- E. When Rome gave Herod the title of king, we know that the title was backed up by the military might of the Empire. When person #3 speaks his criticism of the new king, do the words "speaking truth to power" come to mind?
- F. Does "speaking the truth to power" reasonably describe the things Jesus says and does in Jerusalem during the week which almost immediately followed the telling of this Lucan parable? ...right up to and including his interrogation by Pilate? (More on that below.)
- G. Luke wrote that Jesus decided to tell this parable because he perceived that his followers thought that the "reign of God was about to happen" immediately. What might have caused Jesus' followers to have such an expectation? Might

it have had something to do with the successful encounter Jesus had just had with Zacchaeus the chief tax collector in Jericho, Luke 19:1-10? Did the telling of this parable modify their expectation?

- H. Jesus (in Luke) ends his parable with the slaughter of all the king's enemies. Is there any reason to doubt that #3 steward would have been among those executed?
- I. Then, wrote Luke, "When (Jesus) had said this, He went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem." Would not Jesus have viewed himself as someone like the #3 steward? Does not this parable describe Jesus' behavior during Holy Week? Doesn't it predict his crucifixion?

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

ONE – the word 'gar'. In Luke, steward #3 says, "For I was afraid of you." That word 'for' (in Greek 'gar') makes the steward appear to have acted out of cowardice. However, in Greek usage, when an unspoken reality is understood, 'gar' may be translated as 'although', 'certainly', or 'of course'. Several realities Jesus' hearers would have understood were 1) the nobleman/king was evil and very dangerous and 2) the steward was laying his life on the line. ("Yes sir, this is frightening. But someone has to oppose you and tell you the truth about yourself. If I die for this, I die.")

TWO – Why no criticism of the Roman Empire? Among Jesus' teachings on the Temple Mount during the days between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday is the parable of "the tenants of the vineyard," followed by the remark that the religious leaders all understood that Jesus told this parable against them. Isaiah told a parable which condemned God's vineyard (read Israel) for producing "sour grapes." But here the blame is solely on the "vineyard keepers." During those days on the Temple Mount, Jesus repeatedly criticized and condemned the scribes, Sadducees, high

priests, and Pharisees.

Why do the Temple Mount narratives tell of no criticism of secular authorities? Other than this: The stewards/talents parable is clearly against Herod-like persons (i.e. secular leaders). By inference, then, the Roman authorities are condemned in this parable.

I think it inappropriate to quote Jesus' words, "My kingdom is not of this world," in response to this question. I interpret that statement to mean: "You, Pilate, derive your sovereignty from the point of a spear and overwhelming economic power. That's not what my sovereignty is based upon." In Luke 22:25 Jesus told his disciples how the Gentile rulers "lord it over" everybody, but added, "It shall not be so among you." Therefore I find it hard to believe that Jesus would not speak critically of the empire during those days: their mass crucifixions, their random terror. Jesus could not have been silent. The OT prophets certainly would not have been. Where are such words from the mouth of Jesus?

Some suggest that the so-called Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem was an anti-empire political demonstration. At the time of Passover, the military governor of Judea would make a show of military might by mustering a large contingent of troops who marched into Jerusalem from the west. Jerusalemites were required to attend and mouth praises. Such a show of force would be a warning to anyone contemplating a Passover insurrection. Contrast that show of might with the donkey parade entering Jerusalem from the east with persons shouting praises to the son of King David. Was it not a parody of Roman might?

THREE – speaking of prophetic criticism. I remember a day in El Salvador during the base-community study. Part of our group had travelled to a mountain village in the department of Morazán.

Each of us was invited to introduce ourselves to the villagers. I told them that my congregation was host to refugees from El Salvador. An old man shouted out, "Go home and stop your government! They are killing us!" Which, being interpreted, was, "Don't stand here and tell us about your charity toward Salvadorans. Go home and speak prophetically to your government in behalf of all Salvadorans!" So I did that.

FOUR – taking the kingdom of Heaven/God by violence. In Matthew 11:12 we read that "the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force." Compare this with Luke 16:16: "the good news of the kingdom of God is preached and everyone enters it violently." Both passages had caused me consternation.

In his commentary on Luke, Frederick Danker noted that the verb in Luke 16:16 is in the passive voice, while in Matthew it is active. Every translation of Luke I've read has changed this passive to active. Danker commented that the passive just "did not make sense." I think it does make sense. Throughout the history of the Church, persons of faith have "been victims of violence" as the reign of God has advanced. Thus "everyone enters it" through violence—not violence perpetrated by them but violence perpetrated upon them.

Isaac Watts wrote, "Must I be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas?" Watts got it.

Acts 14:22: "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." So Paul and Barnabas advised the churches at Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Paul and Barnabas got it. Luke got it.

I find the active voice in Matthew 11:12 confusing, especially in the light of Matthew 5:3 and 10 where the poor and those persecuted-for-the-sake-of-righteousness receive the reign of

Heaven as a gift. If we try to take the reign of Heaven by whatever means, it is beyond our grasp. It is the active voice which does not make sense. Indeed "the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the Church."

FIVE – another look at Matthew 25:14-30. Several writers/preachers I have recently encountered suggest that we today are blinded to the financial realities in Jesus' day by our fiscal systems. 1) In Jesus' day for someone to double the money in a brief period of time would have indicated that it was accomplished by chicanery, fraud, or theft. 2) Thus, for a master to applaud such activity would raise questions about the master's integrity. The words of steward #3 are spot on: "You are a scoundrel!" Considering how convincing (I believe) the case is for interpreting Luke 19 as a speaking-truth-to-power parable, I conclude that Matthew must be interpreted in the same light.

SIX – the rich get richer. In both stewards/talents parables, the master orders that the single talent (mina in Luke) be taken from #3 steward and given to #1 who already had ten. There is a story shift here. Would one not have concluded, when the master returned from the journey, that the talents/minas would have been returned to him? Now it is implied that #1 steward keeps the ten talents/minas and receives the one hidden by #3.

I hurried home from Costa Rica in 1988 eager to teach my new discovery to my congregation—mostly low-income African-Americans. When we came to this point in the parable where the money is taken from #3 and given to #1 and the overlord says, "To them that have, more is given and from him who has nothing even what little he has will be taken away," one of the elders of the congregation interrupted me. She said, "The rich gets richer and the poor gets poorer." She had "got it" long ago.

Both Matthew and Luke shift from “speaking the truth to power and paying the consequences” to the reality of economic inequality. It is wrong to conclude that the parable approves such injustice and that God ordains it. In my view both Matthew and Luke agree on this.

SEVEN – preaching this. “How do you preach this?” you ask. For one thing, we no longer have to apologize for God, no longer have to try to explain away horrid behavior. Our God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is not an irascible, cantankerous megalomaniac. There are other scripture passages which teach of the wrath of God. The Luke 19 and Matthew 25 parables of stewards and talents do not.

Secondly, I believe this parable is a good text for leading into Passiontide. At least during Series C (the Year of Luke), this text ought to be the Gospel reading for the Sunday before Palm Sunday. Do we in our preaching ever adequately discuss the meaning of Jesus’ passion? Sadly Luke 19:11-28 is not in the appointed lessons in our new hymnal. It used to be the Gospel reading for the twenty-seventh Sunday after Pentecost (which almost never occurs). However, verse 28, which I think is key, was omitted.

It would be a good reading for an observance of Renewers of Society or Renewers of the Church. When I presented this topic recently, the day was March 12, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Fr. Rutilio Grande (1977), the first of several clergy assassinated in El Salvador. Eventually this led to the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero, March 24, 1980.

EIGHT – looking for more indications of Jesus vs. Rome. Maybe in Matthew 21:19-22. See the fig tree and “this hill” below.

QUICK OVERVIEW OF JESUS’ ACTIVITIES DURING HOLY WEEK ACCORDING TO MATTHEW 21:12 – 24:51. “Cleansed the temple”: house prayer

vs. robbers' den." // Healed in the temple. // Priests & scribes indignant. // Jesus cursed a fig tree which immediately withers. // Disciples ask "How?" // Jesus says, "Faith to...throw this hill into the sea...ask in prayer." // High priest and elders challenge Jesus' authority. // Jesus asks them about John the Baptist's authority. // Parable: two sons who did or did not obey Father's command to work in vineyard. // The vineyard story where the tenants kill the owner's son. // High priests and Pharisees plot. // Wedding-feast parable: "highways and byways"-yet the wedding guest without a proper garment was cast into the outer darkness (more 'outer darkness'-Matt. 8:12). // Plot to trap Jesus with question about taxes to Caesar. // Sadducees question the resurrection, story of one bride and seven brothers. // Pharisees: what is the great commandment? // Jesus to Pharisees: is Messiah David's son? // Jesus criticizes scribes and Pharisees// "The end will come after the gospel of the kingdom has been preached throughout the world." // Jesus preaches "woe, woe, woe" to scribes and Pharisees, "hypocrites." // O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, soon to be desolate. // "They will put you to death" and other dire predictions. // "All of which will come true before the present generation passes away." //When? Only the Father knows. // The coming of the Son of man and dire warnings. // Chapter 24 ends. Next Jesus tells three parables: Wise and Foolish Maidens, Stewards and Talents, and "Inasmuch as you did or didn't show grace, you did or didn't do it to me." Then it is Passover (chapter 26).

A QUICK OVERVIEW OF HOLY WEEK IN LUKE 19:41 – 21:38. (Barely two chapters in Luke.) Jesus weeps over Jerusalem as he approaches the city in the Palm Sunday parade. // "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" //Jesus "cleanses" the temple: "house of prayer vs. robbers' den." // Teaches daily in temple. // High priests, scribes, leaders seek to kill him. // They challenge his authority. // He asks them about John the Baptist's

authority. // Parable of vineyard tenants who kill master's son. // Scribes and high priests plot to kill him. // Question of taxes to Caesar. // Sadducees challenge "resurrection" with story of seven brothers marrying one bride. // Jesus asks scribes how can Christ be David's son. // Jesus warns against scribes. // The widow and her two-coin offering. // Jesus predicts destruction of temple and siege of Jerusalem. // There will be signs: earthquake, sun, moon, fig tree. // But the Son of man will come with deliverance. // Which will happen before present generation passes. // Jesus teaches each day in the temple, but spends nights on the Mt. of Olives. Then it is Passover. (Luke 22.)

The fig tree and "this hill" – The setting for this episode (found only in Matthew and Mark) is the Mount of Olives, overlooking the city. It is Monday, the day after the Palm Sunday parade. Jesus curses a fig tree which immediately withers and dies. Is there symbolism in the fig tree? (I don't know.)

Is it too great a stretch to recall the withered gourd plant in Jonah which God caused to grow and offer shade to Jonah, in a snit over being required to preach to Nineveh in the first place...and then having to watch as Nineveh repented and avoided the punishment Jonah had predicted? Soon the gourd plant was sacrificed to teach Jonah about faithful submission to God's call and acceptance of God's inclusive grace, even for Ninevites. But what about the fig tree? For what purpose was it sacrificed?

When the disciples question Jesus about the cursed fig tree, Jesus switches the subject to "this hill" and to the faith and prayer which could cause 'this hill' to end up in the sea. Why the change of focus? Why are we talking about drowning something/someone in the sea? What was on that "hill" opposite the Mount of Olives that made it a worthy candidate for

drowning? Was it the temple and its religious leaders? the military establishment on 'this hill'? the entire Roman Empire? Does a saying about millstones come to mind? "The least of these my brothers and sisters" being offended? (Lk.17:2/Mt.18:6)

Speaking of Jonah and Nineveh, is there a lesson for us who preach prophetically? A lesson about willingness, yes—about the desire that those on whom we preach woe do repent? Can we welcome a penitent procurator? a centurion? a scribe? a High Priest? a politician in our own time?

Postscript : I am still trying to find a convincing connection between the three parables in Matthew 25 and the Passion of Jesus. Obviously, I see a connection in the talents/stewards parable. I am not persuaded by those who group these parables together as parables about the absent or hidden God. Herod can never be an example of God in my book. Perhaps there is something in the wise-and-foolish-maidens parable about having in you that which is required in order to go with the bridegroom (switching to John) when he is lifted up. And maybe we take up the cross by sharing (taking upon ourselves) the shame (the cursedness?) of the naked, the prisoner, those considered unclean—maybe we thus experience death, and only then know resurrection.

tschroeder2ATkcD0TrrD0Tcom

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