

This parable ought to disturb us. “For to all those who have, more will be given...but those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away...” not to mention the weeping and gnashing of teeth. Down the years we have soothed ourselves. Surely this is about reward for faithfulness...

I’m not so sure any more.

Every so often, Scripture throws us a curve. We struggle to make sense of this ancient document. The cultural attitudes represented are foreign to us. Sometimes the source language leaves the translators baffled, and all they can do is offer suggestions. And Jesus – well, the stories of Jesus are full of hope and promise, but they are also occasionally disturbing. The same Jesus who has been calling for love and compassion – who heals the sick and cures the lame; Jesus, whom Matthew earlier records as saying the Kingdom of God is like a foolishly generous land owner who will pay a day’s wage for an hour’s work – That Jesus, the king of love – now suggests that the kingdom of God is more like a pyramid scheme. The more you have, the more you’ll get. Sounds like Elon Musk, or some 19th century robber-baron. This doesn’t sound like Jesus to me.

‘But Mr. Lackie, it’s the GOSPEL!’ Yes. Yes, it is. That doesn’t make it pleasant...or simple.

This disturbing story has a prologue – ten women, waiting on the bridegroom; some have oil for their lamps, some do not. Those who were prepared get in to the banquet. Those who were not, are out of luck. Equally disturbing as a parable of Jesus – and yet...

There’s no doubt that preparation is often a good thing. Just as, in the saga of the talents, a little bold capitalism seems like a good thing. But these parables aren’t the whole story. God – it’s rumoured – has mercy on the just and the unjust. Jesus promises the unrepentant thief on the cross a reunion in paradise. Good things happen to bad people. The world still turns. God is still God.

When a particular Scripture stands at odds with how we have come to understand God, it’s tempting to tip-toe around it. Call it an anomaly. Move on to the next chapter or verse. But I have grown into the idea that Scripture is big enough - that God is big enough - to suffer my questions, and my doubts, and my occasional complaint about these troubling bits of the Bible.

And the first thin I realize about this portion of Matthew's gospel, is that we are very, very close to 'the end.' The closer the story gets to its conclusion, the more urgent Jesus message becomes. These parables of preparedness and productive work in the absence of the master do sound like the coach urging his team 'not to let me down.'

Jesus has warned his disciples of the trauma and terror that are waiting for him in Jerusalem. He understands how difficult it will be for them to focus on the joy and hope of the emerging kingdom. Bad stuff is coming (and Matthew, putting the gospel together from a post-Easter perspective, knows that the struggle to live into the good news of the resurrection is very real) I think Jesus' parabolic pep-talk was meant for that particular moment.

Do you really think God will reward only those who work hard - and cast aside those who hold tightly to what's been entrusted, so it isn't lost or wasted - just maintained? Is God so mean-spirited? So greedy? So like US that the third slave is consigned to the outer darkness?

I don't. Nor did Jesus describe God in those terms. But a world without Jesus - a world guided by a ravenous need to get ahead - a world built on the myth of constant gain (every day, in every way, we are getting better and better...) THAT world is very much like the place described by the parable.

In this parable, where greed triumphs, and there is no mercy - where the way to get ahead is to look out only for yourself - this world, where the master is away, and you are in dread of his return (since you might not measure up) already sounds too much like our reality. And I am left to wonder how we might overturn the misery of this parable.

What might have happened if the three slaves had pooled their resources? What if they had worked together to ensure the 'success' of all. What if Jesus is here presenting an unattractive alternative?

I admit, this is a long way from conventional wisdom. Generations of theologians have turned this parable into an object lesson for those who would hide (or waste) their 'God-given gifts.' The kingdom is coming, they say - and what are you doing about it? Ut just as our stalwart bible study takes issue against the notion of God as 'old-testament punisher,' I take issue with a

proposed kingdom in which those who are timid (such as the one-talent-slave) will be cast out; left with less than nothing. Driven to darkness and despair.

The world does this all the time, but that's not Jesus' style. That's not how God rolls.

For now, I choose to hear this as Jesus offering an extremely unpalatable alternative - a kingdom without God - and earthly option. Something to be avoided. Taken in context - heard amongst the vast array of Jesus' teaching - that's the best I can do. Jesus cannot be defined by one episode. God cannot be understood by a single Scriptural reference. The bible in its entirety poses us more questions than answers, and yet it still points to the promise of grace and love on an immense scale. And that is the promise that we must bring to our consideration of all the 'difficult texts.'

The world still turns - though I've been haggling with God all week over this message. The hope of the gospel is not erased because I dared to express doubt or confusion. I am not the only one who struggles to make sense of a world that God loves that seems intent on leaving God behind. And still, the good news is that God still prevails and Jesus is risen, and none of our doubts or fears - nothing we say or do - can keep that from being so.