

## TALENTS FOR A PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL WORLD

WC Lubenow  
17 NOVEMBER 2002

I speak in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Perpetuator.

Today's Gospel,<sup>1</sup> like almost all Gospel passages has its brisk reminders to us to be serious. It concludes: "for to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." The parable of the talents is about duty and responsibility. It is of a piece with the other readings. The passage from the book of Zephaniah says, "the great day of the Lord is near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter...That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish." And St. Paul's first letter to the Christians in Thessalonica says, "let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and sober; for those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk in the night." (The Christians in Thessalonica must have been Episcopalians.)

And you must have a measure of pity for your preacher today. To have to talk about the parable of the talents is a stern task. We have heard 10, 468 sermons on the parable of the talents. Everything that has been said about it has been said. One has to strain at the stool to try to find something new and different to say. But preachers, like every one else must play the hand which is dealt them. So, I cannot whine or complain. These are the cards and this is how I am going to play them. The problem, the familiarity of this parable, points out the solution. The parable of the talents is always new and different. That was Jesus's genius. Jesus can always show us new and different ways to look at the world. Jesus does here too. This parable shows us what kind of being God is. It shows what kind of being Jesus is. It shows us what kind of beings we are.

The parable of the talents is about the material world. Its metaphors are about the tangible things of life: about planting, about sowing and gathering, about money and

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 25: 14-15, 19-29.

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bankers and therefore even about investment and profit and loss. It is about what we have and possess. These are the hard-edged, the raw, the flinty and brutal metaphors of physical life. Zephaniah is especially earthy. Because they have sinned against the Lord, the people's "blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung." It is a reminder that God has created a material world. John Henry Newman once said, in life we unlearn its poetry and learn its prose.

As John Polkinghorne has pointed out, God interacts with what God created, but this interaction is not simple intervention. God is entangled in physical creation just as we are. The predictability of these interactions is extremely cloudy. It is difficult to say what is natural process, what is human agency, what is divine providence.<sup>2</sup> All we can say is that creation transforms itself, we transform ourselves, and is a transforming Being. God and creation are all part of a process in which power and authority are inherent in creative action.

The physical world of God's creation is not a world of mere experience or of illusion. It is not a world from which we can or would want to wish to escape. It is a world in which we live. Its meanings and its truths are many and they often conflict with each other. How annoying this is. It is a world that we have a duty and responsibility to understand and to explain through science and art. As Machiavelli put it, "God does not want to do everything."<sup>3</sup>

Therefore it is a world in which we have to act on the basis of our talents. We must strive and engage ourselves in the world for our own sake. Through thought and

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<sup>2</sup> John Polkinghorne, (ed.), *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), pp. 99-101.

<sup>3</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* translated by Harvey C. Mansfield, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 98, 103.

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action our souls can be purified and brought closer to the divine. There is no reward for good behavior. No one can judge it. The outcome is irrelevant. Action may be futile. We may fail. Success or failure are unimportant. Action is an imitation of the divine, but it is only an imitation. Action is the activity of the rational soul. The soul abhors irrationality and must combat it or be corrupted. The purpose of action is to allow thought to continue. When people are reduced to material experience alone they are not human. Flesh and experience are corrupt. But we cannot escape them. We should not wish to escape them. If the Incarnation means any thing it means this: that love and reason are our devices to impose meaning on the world we live in. Love and reason are memories of and yearnings for God; an inkling of what we might become.

(Would you allow me a parenthesis in these remarks? It has nothing to do with the general point I am coming to, but I would like to say something about it. So this is an opportunity to let your minds drift off. Or better yet, consult the Thirty-Nine Articles and discover yet again that they are two sacraments, not three or more. (See p. 872 of the Prayer Book.) If your minds so drift, or if you so consult, I will call you back in a few moments as I return to my main point. Viewing the parable of the talents as a way of understanding the relationship between material and spiritual creation provides a view of the relation between science and religion. Viewed this way, the gap between science and religion is not as great a gulf as it is normally taken to be. The conflict between science and religion has to some extent always been exaggerated.<sup>4</sup> In fact religion, since the nineteenth century, has become quite scientific and religious studies are based upon scrupulous methods of textual criticism and interpretation. Theological studies are quite

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<sup>4</sup> Peter J. Bowler, Reconciling Science and Religion: The Debate in Early Twentieth-Century Britain (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

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hardheaded and analytical and the knowledge they produce rises to the top of professional and academic standards. Science, for its part, is quite literary in the sense that it is based upon interpretation. No one makes claims for a kind of superior methodological objectivity. Physics is characterized by a high level of ambiguity. As we know since Heisenberg, the very methods one uses is an intervention into nature, distorting the very objects one seeks to observe. One can measure the mass of a object; one can measure the velocity of a object; one cannot measure the mass and the velocity of an object at the same time. Bruno Latour has reversed in an interesting way our manner of discussing science and religion. We usually think of religion, since it deals with heavenly things, is removed from human experience. We usually think of science, since it deals with the materiality of nature, as being more connected with human experience. Actually, science, since it is so abstract and since much of what it deals with cannot be observed at all, is far removed from human life. On the other hand, because of the Incarnation, religion (our religion) is earthly, earthy, and, as the word implies, quite fleshly.<sup>5</sup> All this is a way of saying that dogma (whether religious or scientific) is a trap; God and creation are unfinished. Now if your minds have drifted or if you have been consulting the Thirty-Nine Articles, come back and follow me like leopards.)

And if the parable of the talents gives us insight into God's nature, it also gives us insight into Jesus's nature. Jesus proclaims the coming of the Kingdom. Jesus—at least in the synoptic Gospels—is no theologian. Jesus is not concerned with dogmas, doctrines or beliefs. In St. Mark's Gospel he does not go about exclaiming "I am the Truth." Jesus is concerned with life. He teaches and heals. And strikingly enough the same verb in

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<sup>5</sup> Bruno Latour, "Another Take on the Science and Religion Debate," a paper given in Santa Barbara for the Templeton series on science, religion, and human experience, (May 2002).

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Greek for healing is the very verb for saving. And Jesus proclaims the coming of the Kingdom now, in this life, not in some other life at some other time (which might be more comfortable for us). And we endorse this proclamation when we pray, as we shall pray in a few moments when we come to the communion, “Thy will be done on earth.” His is a constant reminder that the “Kingdom of God is in the midst of you.”

Jesus uses the expression the Kingdom of God no fewer than eighty times in the synoptic Gospels and always with telling effect. Jesus’s audiences, from everything we can tell, were mesmerized and astonished by the effect of his teaching of the Kingdom. As Mark and Luke put it (in slightly different ways) “He taught them as one who had authority, not as the scribes.” (Mark 1:22; Luke 4: 32) His authority was not the authority of a messiah or a risen Christ. His authority came from his mighty teaching and healing. And because of these talents he was able to draw people to him. “What is this?” the bystanders said. “A new kind of teaching with authority. When he commands even unclean spirits obey him.” (Mark 1: 27; Luke 4: 36)<sup>6</sup> These are the tangible material talents of a person living and working in a tangible materials world, surrounded by ignorance and suffering.

And what of our talents and how are we to use them? Our talents are tangible and material. We live in a prosperous country and a prosperous community. We are richer than most of the people of the world. We are richer than the ancestors who have been taken to Abraham’s and Sarah’s bosom. We have satisfying professions. But there is the difficult process of discernment to do. We have to learn what we have. And then there are talents which are less material and tangible. We are often more aware of the talents of others than our own . I think of Al Schmidt’s stewardship sermon in which he deployed

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<sup>6</sup> Geza Vermes, The Changing Face of Jesus (New York: Penguin Compass, 2000), pp. 168-169.

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his skills as a planner to explain to us what we might do as the next year's budget is structured. It is a talent. I think of young John Marshall who read the lesson from Ecclesiasticus on All Saint's Sunday. He read it with an intensity and meaning, pausing at just the right moment in the passage paying tribute to the great and the good but also to the humble and the ordinary. It is a talent. I think of the catalogue of volunteer positions Marianne Buzby has drawn up listing the opportunities for all of us to deploy our talents. It is a talent. I think of the spiritual gifts workshops Renee is organizing. That also is a talent, a talent to discover other talents

And this brings me to a sort of a point or two. The points are these. There are many opportunities that we know of for the use of our talents. However, there are many opportunities which we do not know of. Talent and opportunity are not fixed and inflexible. Talent and opportunity are expanding and one of the tasks of discernment is for us to discover and open up opportunities. It is not an isolated or individual activity. I need you to help me discover my talents. Perhaps I can help you discover your talents. Together we bring in God's Kingdom now and in this place.

The importance of community was brought home to me in three ways in the last two weeks. And if it is brought home three times, there must be something to it. At the Vision Committee meeting two Wednesdays ago members were discussing the relationship between belief and behavior. Contrary to conventional wisdom, members pointed out that our beliefs follow from the associations we have, from our social relations. At the lecture series this past Sunday, the speaker, who was talking about Greek Orthodox Christianity said that in his tradition, the community comes first. Everything else, belief, dogma, and doctrine come second. Finally at the Gallup Conference on the

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parish survey, which the Rector, John Funston, Chuck Haughton and I attended this week, the point became sharply clear. Belonging, community, and our associational behavior leads to belief. Engagement is an emotional economy which guides everything else. The survey shows our great strengths. We are a community which, in a traditional sense, is highly experiential (because of the important we attach to the Eucharist). We are congregationally participatory. From this all else follows: we seek clarity, direction, and opportunity. The parish survey is a tool to guide us into greater effectiveness and deeper faith. And all of this will come clearer to us and in greater detail as the Vestry develops plans to utilize the insights the parish survey gives us.

Our religion is not an easy religion, not because of its doctrines and dogmas, though sometime it is hard to understand them, or even see the point to them. Our religion is difficult because it makes difficult demands upon us. Therein is its genius. Our religion is ideally suited to help us to understand and live in the complex and complicated material world. Our religion, chiefly expressed in Jesus's parables, is a religion which shows us how to understand and live in a world which is physically and mentally and spiritually ambiguous. It is by so living that we can find our talents and use them to come into the Kingdom. And so I return to today's Gospel: we say to Jesus, "you have given us five talents and we have made five more talents." And Jesus will say "well done good and trustworthy people; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many. Enter into my joy." And so it may be, guided as we are by the only things that are certain in this world, reason and love.

Christ is Risen, Amen.

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