

Sermon 13-3-22. The Ten Minas (TK)

Luke 19 v 11-27

As we look at one of the stories Jesus told this morning, it's good to recognise that explaining parables can be hard.

Many of Jesus' parables rely on understanding this form of storytelling, are told to a specific set of people for a specific reason and who bring to it their circumstances and history. The original hearers would have instinctively understood it. But the main point of them wasn't understanding it so much as the response they produced. They are more than an illustration. Jesus told parables to get people listening and thinking and then to respond in some way to himself and to what he was doing.

This means that often when we think about a parable now it's a bit like interpreting a joke; we lose some of the immediacy and then we lose its purpose as it becomes about understanding it rather than responding.

So, here are some things that might be helpful to know or be reminded of before we hear the reading and which I hope will help us as we respond to God's Word this morning.

I think possibly the most important thing to know is that this story was told by Jesus at a meal in the house of Zacchaeus, one of the enormously unpopular and corrupt tax collectors. We are not going to read it, but I think we all know the story of Zacchaeus, who wasn't very tall and climbed a tree so that he could see Jesus over the crowds in Jericho. Zacchaeus, labelled by others 'a sinner' is now calling Jesus 'Lord', he wants to give half his possessions to the poor, and not just pay back anyone he has defrauded but pay them back four times as much. In response to grumbings about his being a guest of a sinner, Jesus points out that he has come to seek out and save the lost and then tells this story.

It's a story that would have had echoes for those listening of a real event about 30 years before, when Herod's son Archelaus went to Rome to be confirmed as King, he was followed by a delegation of Judeans who didn't want him to rule over them. He carried on ruling, or rather mis-ruling for ten years before another delegation successfully opposed him.

It's also a story about a king and his servants, and those listening would also assume that any story about a king and his servants was about God and them, the Jewish nation.

The listeners would have had a knowledge of Scripture including the prophets, which would lead them to believe that one day God would return to Jerusalem, to establish his kingdom there, which they would be part of.

Finally, included in the audience were the disciples. They were struggling to keep up with what was happening. A short time before, just a chapter back in Luke's gospel, Jesus had explained to them what was going to take place as they arrived in Jerusalem, what was in the plan as laid out in the Scriptures, his arrest, his beating, his death and his resurrection. But they were struggling to understand. Luke says 'But, they understood nothing about these things'.

I hope this might help us as we listen to the story, but in case we get too worried, it's worth remembering that not everything in a parable means something, nor do we need to understand it all. But we *are all* being asked to respond, to Jesus and to what he came to do.

READING (Luke 19 v 11-27)

What do you think was the initial response to this parable?

As people listened who would they have identified with?

What would they have agreed with or what would have surprised them?

What is your initial response to the parable?

Zacchaeus might have understood and appreciated the concept of putting money to work.

I wonder if there were some who were wondering if they had just heard Jesus suggest he was the returning King? Did Jesus just imply he was God?

Some might have been cheering on the delegation, thinking it was about Herod and then wondered if he was talking about something else. Could it be he was making a point about those opposing someone else instead?

The disciples might have finally realised that going to Jerusalem wasn't going to be plain sailing; there was going to be opposition. They may have grasped a little more about Jesus.

And at this point Jesus goes ahead, up to Jerusalem, leaving them to think about it.

This is the point where we wish that it was like some of Jesus' other parables where he gives a point-by-point explanation.

But there's a saying that goes 'Some books should be tasted, some devoured, but only a few should be chewed and digested thoroughly'. And parables like this are ones that benefit, that seem to be designed to be chewed over. No doubt the disciples on the road up to Jerusalem would have talked about it as they walked, while in Jericho, maybe especially at Zacchaeus' house, it would have been discussed and debated.

So, I did wonder if maybe at this point, I should just stop and leave us all chewing over it.

And yes, we should chew it over, but first I want to suggest two sets of people I think it is worth considering as we respond to this story.

In a sense this is my response to this parable.

Firstly, I've been thinking about those who don't want the nobleman to be King and those who serve him. It won't have escaped the listeners' notice that the citizens are the ones who opposed his kingship, and for whom there are fatal consequences, and the servants are faithful and rewarded.

Jesus, as he told this story, had been opposed by the religious leaders and teachers but a so-called sinner, a tax collector, had recently hurried down from his vantage point in a tree, welcomed Jesus into his home and was now calling him Lord.

Things, as so often with Jesus, are turned on their head. The first will be last, the last will be first, the meek shall inherit the earth. Those with knowledge, power and status are destroyed whilst those who are seen as less important, marginalised or ostracised become part of the Kingdom. It's not about who you are but about who you obey, which in turn is seen in what we do, how we live.

This is a hard parable, not least because it doesn't give us soft edges or a way out. While we shouldn't base all the details of our theology of judgement on a parable, what is made very clear is that there is judgement and those who oppose Jesus will not be in his Kingdom. This may account for why you don't hear this parable much. There doesn't seem to be a neutral position. We have to take the decision to follow Jesus or not, seriously.

As we to wait for Jesus' return, for the final establishment of a new heaven and a new earth, I think this parable asks us to think about our assumptions - do we expect to be part of his Kingdom and if so, on what grounds? Have we opposed Jesus or obeyed him? Do we need to spend some time chewing that over?

Secondly I have been thinking about the second set of people to notice are the servants who put the money they are entrusted with to work and make more money, and the one who just hid it away.

The people entrusted by God with his kingdom at the time of this story were the religious leaders. They were singled out for criticism by Jesus for their treatment of others and the way they burdened people with their interpretation of the law. They grumbled about who Jesus spent time with and the things he did.

In contrast, Zacchaeus had just decided to give away half his possessions and pay back ill-gotten gains, with compensation.

Which of these had put what they had received from God to work?

Who had grown the Kingdom?

Who had sat on their hands and done nothing constructive?

As we wait for Jesus' return, what do we do with all he has entrusted us with; how and where do we put it to work?

In fact, what has he entrusted us with?

We immediately think of gifts and talents, and our money and possessions. This is right. We recognise that, as the prayer after a collection goes 'all things come from you O Lord and of your own do we give you'. It's good to ask, how do we put these things to work?

But I want to suggest that there is a wider growing of the kingdom as we put not only our abilities and resources to work but as we live out all the characteristics and values of the kingdom.

Zacchaeus didn't just give money away; others did that and were criticised by Jesus. In the way he acted, Zacchaeus demonstrated humility, as he recognised he needed to do things differently: justice as he returned money he had gained fraudulently, generosity as he did so with interest and gave away half his possessions. In not just what he did, but in the way he did it and in whose name he did it, Zacchaeus showed himself to be obedient to the King, he brought a bit more of the Kingdom of God into Jericho that day.

Do we use *all* that God has entrusted us with? Maybe we do need to think about, rethink, how we use our abilities and resources, but God's kingdom isn't just made up of doing things and using stuff. That sounds exhausting and possibly limiting. What if we added all the other things that characterise God's Kingdom and put them to work as well, saw them grow?

If we put compassion to work, justice to work?

If we put love to work, mercy to work?

If we put forgiveness, patience, joy to work?

The list of characteristics of God's kingdom is long, rich and transformative.

What would happen if this week we put all we have been given in Jesus to work? Wherever we are, whatever we doing and whoever we are with?

This parable suggests that while there might be opposition to Jesus, putting all he has given us to work brings growth and flourishing.

Or do we just sit on our hands, hide what has been given to us? Make some excuses, because it is an easier and safer, albeit a diminished version of God's kingdom.

It might be something to chew over.

After Jesus had told this story, he went ahead going up to Jerusalem - leaving everyone chewing over what he had said.

After a week of chewing, I have come away from this parable asking

Who is opposing, who is obeying Jesus as Lord and King?

Do we/I, expect to be, want to be part of his Kingdom?

Am I hiding what God has entrusted me with or am I putting all the riches we have been given in Jesus to work?

Now I will leave you to chew it over. As we approach Easter, celebrating his death and resurrection and wait for his coming again in glory, what is your response to this story?

What is your response to Jesus, to who he is and to what he came to do?

Amen.