

So this week is the second week of our sermon series inspired by the role of music in worship. The theme this week is 'discovering skills and releasing gifts', and the readings have been chosen to accompany the series.

What I found, preparing for this morning, was that I really wasn't sure what to make of the readings. The core idea of the parable of the talents – the idea that we have a responsibility to make use of what we are given – has become very important to me. But other than that, and other than the beauty of the very short second reading, there's something about these readings which leaves me rather cold.

So I've been wondering why, and I think I've worked it out.

I think the reason is that the social dynamics underlying the readings are so very different from ours. And to my mind, when it comes to 'discovering skills and releasing gifts', those social dynamics, in both readings, are really limiting.

Take the first reading (1 Chron. 15:16-22). It has that list of all the different people appointed to provide music in the Temple. Obviously this has to do with music and worship. But there's no emphasis on discovering gifts and using them to their best effect. David simply gives orders, and people are appointed. Only in the case of Chenaniah is there any mention that he is appointed because of a particular talent: he is appointed to direct the music, because he understands it. Even there, there's no sense of this being voluntary or willing, just that he's good at it.

Thankfully, we then had the very brief second reading (Ps. 33:1-3), where there *is* a sense of rejoicing and spontaneity.

But even so: if people were appointed to lead the music in the way described in Chronicles, how did they respond to the psalms?

Then we had the gospel (Matt. 25:14-30). As I said at the beginning, the parable of the talents is very important for me. But the way the story is told as a whole presents problems. The most obvious one is its ending, where it talks about everything being taken away from those who have nothing, and them being thrown into outer darkness. If the master in the story is supposed to be God, maybe we might think we have to go along with this picture of God's justice – but how do we reconcile this with the picture of the loving Father Jesus gives us elsewhere, and all the talk about grace and mercy? And then when we think back to the beginning of the story, what are we to make of this master who *goes away* and gives very arbitrary orders to each of his *slaves*. Again, this is very different to how Jesus elsewhere describes the relationship between God and his people. If this is how this master behaves, then surely the third servant is actually pretty justified in his response, saying that he knows his master to be cruel and unjust man.

Why is the parable as it is, then? I can't help wondering whether it's similar to other places in the New Testament, where Jesus takes the line: if things are like this even amongst you human beings, what do you think it will be like with God? That is to say, maybe the meaning is more like: well, if your harsh human masters expect return on their investments (and remember, 'talent' in this story means money. It's us that have developed it to mean other things, because of this story) - if your harsh human masters expect

return on their investments, don't you think God expects return on his?

And if this is how this parable works, it makes it very clear to me why I find the reading far less inspiring than it could be. Yes, I go along with the core idea, very much so. But the rest is all based on a master-slave relationship which has to be one of the least likely to 'discover skills and release gifts'.

What this leaves me with, however, is a very positive attitude towards where we are now. We have huge advantages that weren't there David's time, or in Jesus' time. We have freedoms that didn't exist, most of us enjoy levels of prosperity and security and education that just weren't there before, that have been far beyond the reach of most people in most of history. We are free to build strong relationships with each other and work together, to develop our own talents and those of other people.

We take all this for granted perhaps and therefore don't realise what a gift it is. Our readings today should be a reminder. The musicians in the first reading had no choice or autonomy. The main characters in the gospel are slaves who are treated arbitrarily and are given no opportunity to work together or share experiences or encourage each other. Who knows, if they had been able to do so, perhaps the third slave would have been able to respond very differently. What is lacking in both our main readings is any sense of agency, or freedom to choose, or commitment to the purpose.

We are in a much better position, for which we should be grateful; and because we are in so much better a position, the parable of the talents can go so much further for us – and

therefore demands much more of us, but in an encouraging way, not a pressurising way.

I am finding it difficult to stick to the main themes of this sermon series when I'm also trying to deal with the readings. I'm not sure that what I've said so far does much with the theme of 'music in worship', or 'discovering skills and releasing gifts'. However, here at St Peter's, what strikes me is that what already happens with respect to music actually gives us an example to follow across the parish and in different aspects of our worship and fellowship. At the beginning of this service I had the privilege of awarding a medal to one of our junior choir. At St Peter's, music has probably been the area in which talents and gifts have been most nurtured over the years, with the adult choir, the children's choir, the music group where anyone who can play an instrument is encouraged. Over the course of the year, these talents are heard by a lot of people, drawing them into worship. This music is a huge asset to the church. There is always scope for development, of course, and there will always be tensions within a close-knit community. But when it comes to nurturing gifts and talents, with music we are ahead of the game. What we could do with here is a deeper appreciation of the great range of talents offered within this community, and a willingness to work together and nurture each other to the full, rejoicing in our freedom to do so. With that kind of dynamic, directed rightly towards God, we can take that parable of the talents and develop it a lot further, because our setting and our relationships make that possible.