

Burying treasure as divine resistance

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 19 November 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 25A

**Contemporary Reading: from “*The Church and the Jewish Question*”
by Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Matthew 25:14-30**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Some years ago now, we had a lovely bishop on the New South Wales Central Coast who would occasionally run a workshop which he entitled ‘*Don’t just do something, sit there!*’

This was a deliberate response to our modern tendencies towards hyperactivity, including within Church circles. In the bishop’s case, he was not neglectful of social justice. He was, for example, very involved in the work of Samaritans (aka Anglicare in the Diocese of Newcastle), and a leading figure in Angligreen environmental work. However, he saw that, without grace and space for God, even the best of our words and works are at risk of becoming easily frenzied and frustrated. Vitally, theologically, over activism also risks colluding with our world’s self-concerned drives for ever increasing productivity and consumption of various kinds – each of which can become godlike demands upon us.

Particularly in Western Christianity, these also make use of ideas like the Protestant work ethic, which can easily reinforce the false idea that we essentially have value through what we do, rather than who we are, and that we are judged by what we achieve. No wonder our lives and world become so stressed, and it becomes so difficult to handle conflicts within, between, and beyond, ourselves. Just ‘being’ is so easily despised – whether this is through simply sitting, contemplation rather than action, space and silence rather than words and works.

No wonder God, the source of being and becoming, also easily disappears. Yet, as the bishop suggested, these may actually be ways back to balance, including helping heal great conflicts. Understood in this way, our Gospel parable today calls us to consider burying our talents, our time and our treasure, as means of divine resistance and renewal...

Does such a reading of today’s Gospel seem odd to you? If, like me, you have spent any length of time in churches, you may have heard this parable expounded as an encouragement to be productive: to use our treasure, our money, our time, and other gifts, to do, to achieve, to make more - more of whatever it is we are called to do and achieve. Maybe, like me, you have even been in a church where everyone is given some money and asked to go and make some more, bringing it back to the church for its use.

Now, using the parable in such ways is not entirely unhelpful. Perhaps our hard-pressed treasurer might even consider that giving each of us some of our church’s money to make more might indeed be a worthwhile idea? I most certainly would not want to say that financial careers and wise and creative money making are not valuable.

Perhaps however we might consider turning this parable upside down. For, instead of encouraging certain types of financial and other activity, what if Jesus is actually encouraging us to bury the treasure given to us, as a means of divine resistance? Conventionally, this is called the Parable of the Talents (or bags of money). What, however, if we read it as the *Parable of the Angry Master* instead? Maybe it makes just as much, if not more, albeit different, sense?

Does the rich master's behaviour come across to you as charming, or just? He is pretty brutal, isn't he? Not least in his punishment of the man who buried the one talent. For as that man said, he did nothing wrong. He kept the master's wealth safely and returned it to him. His 'crime' was that he did not make more. He did not serve as a tool of the rich man's commercial empire building. For is this not a classic pyramid scheme, in which the rich get richer by recruiting, or in this case forcing, others to make money for them?

If they do that, those others get some approval, and a small extra remuneration: but if not, they are in trouble. Even if they succeed, they are still on the economic and social treadmill, from which they are expected to make greater and greater returns for their master.

Is that the God of Jesus, do you think? Does God only approve of us if we are productive, as defined by worldly standards? Are we really at risk of punishment if we fail? And are we really at risk of punishment, like the man with one talent, if we simply live sustainably, and look after what we have been given?

To me, reading the parable that way turns life, and faith, into a giant game of *The Apprentice*, that successful TV show through which, significantly, Donald Trump rose to such public prominence. For, in *The Apprentice*, everyone has to compete against one another, running whatever errands the angry master demands: and, if we are not successful enough, well, we know the response: *'you're fired!'*

Again, is that really the God of Jesus? Sadly, some people do feel that is what God is like. Like a demanding master, God is seen as partial in 'his' favours, and angry and punitive about any failings, even though this God has set seemingly difficult, even impossible, rules and targets. But is the kin-dom of God really like a pyramid scheme? Are we, in our lives, really just trapped in an episode of *The (Divine) Apprentice*? Is God really like Donald Trump, and our world's angry masters?

The answer is, of course, no!

Knowing that helps us read this parable very differently. For reading more healthily, Jesus is not so much prescribing joining in our world's pyramid schemes, which operate in every generation, as describing such realities and pointing us to divine resistance. It is after all the third slave who is actually faithful to God, even if they have displeased the angry master.

One key to grasping this is the master's charge that the man *'ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.'* For this is at least verging on commending the practice of usury: that is, making unethical loans which unfairly benefit the loaner and taking advantage of others' struggles.

Usury is again and again condemned in the Bible, and until the modern age, lending with interest was highly questionable in Christian ethical teaching. Of course, it sits happily with modern capitalist societies, with the rich often getting richer through competitive means, including high interest, property, and rental, rates. Yet this is not the justice of the Bible and of Jesus.

What I am suggesting is that, even when we hear this parable encouraging us to use our gifts, including our money, wisely, we might also be wary of contributing to forms of a Prosperity Gospel. For we are not saved by prosperity, or by economic or any other activity. We are not of ultimate value by anything we do, or do not do. And we are certainly not at risk of punishment by God for joining in today's economic, spiritual, or any other, pyramid schemes.

We are saved by grace alone: by the love of God which values us just as we are, now and always, until, and beyond, the end of time. The angry masters may throw us into forms of 'outer darkness', as the angry master in the parable does to the one who refuses to share in the pyramid scheme. Yet we remain loved by God, and, in refusing to join the power play, we offer resistance through which God's love can bring transformation.

Our contemporary reading today, from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, speaks of this kind of resistance and how our divine calling is not to be '*good and trustworthy slaves*' of our world's angry masters but simply faithful to God.

Writing about the Church's calling in the face of increasing Nazi repression of Jews, Bonhoeffer outlined three major responses: namely, firstly, questioning and making the state (and those in power) responsible for what they do; secondly, service to the victims of the actions of the powerful; and, thirdly, as Bonhoeffer put it, '*seiz[ing] the wheel itself*', directly offering resistance.

Actually, as scholars have outlined,¹ Bonhoeffer's guidance goes even deeper. In particular, Bonhoeffer was clear that, for Christians, resistance to oppression is not so much about moral action as such, but about proclamation of the Word, or Way, of God. This may involve action, but it is, first and foremost, about proclaiming God's grace and sovereignty.

In other words, in the face of oppressive behaviours, our calling as Church is not to become simply another humanitarian group involved in moral and political campaigns. Such work is indeed valuable, and members of the Church may feel called to share in it. However, our first task together is to witness to the love of God, and, in doing so, open the door to the possibilities of divine grace and transformation.

This brings us back to the parable of the angry master. For the resistance the third slave offers to the powerful tyrant is not one of direct and predictable conflict. He does not misuse the angry master's money but simply refuses to share in its further oppressive use.

The systems and context of his day do not afford him opportunity to lead a wholesale revolution. Yet he can still witness to love, not money, as the ultimate heart of life. By his resistance, he thereby offers others the possibility of knowing their value in who they are not in what they do for the powerful. That, in a very different context, is how it is with us too.

Following Bonhoeffer, in response to Jesus, we can do what we can to speak out against the powerful, to care for the victims of power, and to put a spoke in the wheels of power. Yet, like the third man in Jesus' parable, our greatest witness to God lies in refusing to be less than we are, and not trying to be more than we are.

¹ See for example Michael DeJonge, partly summarised at <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/dietrich-bonhoefferstheology-of-resistance/10766546>

When we refuse to participate in power games for economic and social status; when we consume only what we actually need, and not what others tell us we need; when we refuse to bow the knee to the great modern gods of GDP and productivity for its own sake; and when we are at least wary of the pyramids of housing and other inequality; then we help manifest the kin-dom of God.

We stop being extras in The Apprentice and treasure what really matters. Of course, we may still be fired and punished by the angry masters, but we reveal their true face and strengthen the courage of others.

So, when the next angry master tells you what to do, whether that master be in our own hearts and minds or externally, don't just do something, but sit there, bury treasure and know that you are loved, utterly loved, now and always, and for ever, and beyond the end of time.

In the name of Jesus, who resisted pyramids and powers even unto death, and, in doing so, proclaimed the victory of love. Amen.