



On your marks

Jesus taught people using parables, but these special stories are not quite the cosy allegories we sometimes make them out to be, particularly with children. They are intended to get us thinking and often they subvert our expectations about the character of God and about what his kingdom is like. Maybe in our retelling we ought to try and recapture some of the disturbing and revolutionary impact of these simple stories?

Within the Godly Play methodology, parables have a particular place and are presented in such a way as to enable children (and adults!) to think again about what these stories might be saying to us. Jesus intended us to work out their meaning for ourselves and not to have it handed to us on a plate! N.B. The following outline is a little longer than usual so if you do tackle it, give yourself more time to get your head around the story and in particular the wondering!

Get set

One of the parables not tackled in the Godly Play corpus is the Parable of the Talents in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 25: 14-30) and its similar but also distinctive parallel version known as the Parable of the Pounds in Luke's gospel (Luke 19: 11-27). The basic storyline is the same in both and perhaps that suggests that Jesus used the same stories on more than one occasion but with variations. They are kingdom parables and deal with the realm of politics and money, which possibly makes them more difficult for children. They also belong to those parables that revolve around the return of a king or master at the end of the story. Both stories are recorded as coming near the end of Jesus' teaching ministry and close to the events of Easter. It may be that both stories are remembered particularly in this context by the early Church as it helped them throw some light on their thoughts about Jesus' promised second coming?

The two stories seem to be tackling key questions, namely: 'what are we to do with God's gift of life to us?' or 'how should we live this life best while waiting for Jesus to return?'

As parables however they do contain some difficulties for us:

Money is used to represent what each person is given and it's often hard to see beyond this to what it really might mean. Perhaps this is even more true in today's culture?

In each story it is financial profit or political gain that is offered as a picture of the success of faithfulness with life's gift and this may also be a stumbling block.

There is the fact that the different people are given different gifts in one story, whereas they are given the same amounts in the other.

In Matthew's story there are only three servants, who were given varying amounts of money, whereas in Luke there are 10 servants, although only three are focused on at the end.

In Luke's story the context, within which each does his best with the amounts given, is one of hostility to themselves and the kingdom.

The element of judgment in both is also intriguing. In Matthew the judgement falls on one of those servants, whereas in Luke it also falls on the nobleman's enemies.

The rewards are also different. Matthew's story talks of more being given in terms of money, whereas in Luke's story it is a reward of responsibility over cities.

Finally, as often with the parables, we are left with a genuine but puzzling thought about why it should not have been regarded as a faithful thing to have kept something safe and simply given back the 'trust' intact to the master on his return. The one who does this in both stories earns condemnation rather than a well done.

There is a lot to wonder about in this story and maybe the early Church was also struggling to understand what it means?

Go!

1. The parable in Matthew is the simplest to present but not necessarily the easiest to wonder about! Using a Godly Play approach, prepare the following items to be put into a gold box:
 - A gold-coloured underlay for the story
 - Some silver tokens in a gold box to represent what was given to each of the servants
 - A grey square of felt and a wooden block to represent the city where one of the servants goes; a green square of felt and a wooden tree to represent the countryside where the second servant goes;
 - some small coloured pieces, the same colouring as the underlay, which can be placed over the one piece of silver that was buried by the third servant.
 - Finally you will need some wooden figures to represent the master and each of the three servants.
2. Introduce the story to your group by wondering whether this box contains a parable?
 - It is gold-coloured and gold is valuable and special. Parables are special and valuable too...even more valuable than gold.
 - It is an old box and parables are old.
 - It could be a present and indeed parables are presents, given to us before we were born. We don't have to buy them, take them or steal them. They are ours; even if we don't know what a parable is, it belongs to us.
 - Finally the box has a lid. Parables also have lids. We have to work hard to get inside and find the meaning. It isn't easy but if we keep coming back we will discover what is really there.
3. Take out the gold-coloured underlay and wonder what it could really be.
Then lay down, first the grey felt square in one quadrant to your right near to the children

with the wooden block on it and then the green felt square and tree in the quadrant to the left near the group who are listening. Now you are ready for the parable.

4. Once there was someone who said such wonderful things and did such amazing things that people followed him. As they followed him they heard him talking about God, about God's love and about God's kingdom. They also listened to his stories, but there was still so much they didn't understand. So they used to ask him questions and once they said to him: you've told us how much God loves us; you've told us that God rescues and cares for us; you've told us how much God wants us to choose the right way to live; but how does God want us to live our lives? What is the best way to live in this kingdom you talk about? When they asked this, this is one of the stories he told:

Once there was a man who was going on a long journey, so he called together his three servants. He asked them to look after everything that belonged to him while he was away.

Place the man who is leaving near the centre of the base cloth, close to yourself and then introduce the 3 servants, one at a time as they are mentioned in the story. Place beside the traveller a gold box from which you take the silver tokens representing the talents that he gave them to look after.

He trusted all his riches to these three helpers. Each of them had different gifts and skills

To the first he gave five coins

To the second he gave two coins

To the third helper he gave one coin

He then set off on his journey.

Remove the traveller

The first helper went to the city where he bought and sold many things.

Move this man to the grey felt

With his five coins, he made five more.

Add five more coins beside the pile he already has

The second helper went to the countryside where he worked hard on the land.

Move this man to the green felt

With his two coins, he made two more.

Add two more coins beside the two he already has

The third helper decided to keep his coin safe and not lose it. So he went and buried it in the ground.

Cover the one coin with a piece of felt, the same colouring as the base cloth

After a long time, the master who went on the journey returned.

Re-introduce the traveller

He called his helpers together to see what they had done with his riches.

The one who had been given five coins came forward and said: here are your 5 coins and look, I have made five more.

The master was pleased and said: well done, good and faithful servant, you have looked after what I



gave you very well. I have much more for you to do. Come and share my joy.

Next, the one who had been given two coins came forward and said: here are your two coins and look, I have made two more.

The master was pleased and said: well done, good and faithful servant, you've looked after what I gave you very well. I have much more for you to do. Come and share my joy.

Finally the one who had been given one coin came forward and said: here is your one coin. I knew that you would not want me to lose it. You trusted me to keep it safe. So because I was afraid of losing it, I hid it in the ground. Here it is, exactly what you gave me.

The master was angry and said: you've been lazy and foolish. You knew that I always want what I give to be used and to increase, so why didn't you find a way of doing that with your coin? You do not deserve to keep it. I am taking it away from you and giving it to the one who has made most.

What is used grows, but what is not used is lost.

Remove his one coin and add it to the pile of ten

You do not deserve to be part of my kingdom.

Remove the third helper to a place outside the base cloth

5. Pause for a while before you start wondering about this story.

I wonder if the helpers have names?

I wonder why the master went off on such a long journey?

I wonder why he trusted these three with all his riches?

I wonder what these riches really are?

I wonder where the master really went?

I wonder where this city really is?

I wonder where this countryside really is?

I wonder why one helper decided to bury his coin?

I wonder what would have happened if the other helpers had lost some of their coins?

I wonder what the master would have said if they had lost everything?

I wonder what this place really is?

I wonder what this story really means?

6. In Luke's version of the story there were 10 servants, although only 3 were interviewed, as in Matthew's version. You might like to tell the parable in Luke's gospel using similar materials, but simply have ten coins to represent each of the 10 servants. These could be arranged in a semi-circle across the base cloth in front of the nobleman who travels away. This allows further wonderings to take place about the other seven. Point to each one in turn as you ask:

I wonder what the master would have said if...

This man said: I traded with my pound but the business failed and I lost the lot

This man said: I traded with my pound but then it was all stolen



This man said: I traded with my pound but I made no money at all

This man said: I was on my way to the market and I saw a beggar in great need, so I gave away my pound

This man said: I used my pound to buy some garden tools and I dug an older person's garden for free

This man said: I traded with my pound but everything went wrong and now I've ended up in debt

This man said: I traded with my pound but I only ended up just breaking even, so I still just have the pound you gave me. Here it is.

I wonder what the master would say to these seven servants?

7. This parable in its two variants raises all sorts of questions about things that seem rather unfair to us. The ways of the kingdom are very different and just like us, the first people to hear the parable certainly found them puzzling too.

I wonder, just what is this parable saying to us...to you and me?