

## Abundant possibilities

Felicity O'Brien, 13 November 2011. All rights reserved.

Today is our last Sunday worshipping here with you at St Christopher's. Next Sunday I take up the role of Deacon assistant in the parish of Pauatahanui, after my ordination on Saturday.

When I looked at the roster about today's service, I noted that the theme for the day is "abundant possibilities" – This fits in with my journey! It's a good one for this spring season too – everything is green and gorgeous. Probably something to do with the amount of rain we've had recently. My garden is full of abundant possibilities – the rabbits have already produced a litter of seven – see me afterwards if you would like one!

Do you see the possibilities? When my husband looks at our garden, he sees lots of green leaves of varying shades and shapes, and the odd flower here and there. He doesn't notice what I see – there are buds poking up, getting ready to flower, and soon it will be a colorful display of blooms against the green backdrop.

Do you see possibilities, or does your vision stop at how things are today?

Abundant possibilities can be an exciting thought, - anything good could happen! But it can also be threatening – we don't know what is coming next, or how to react to it. We can cope with what's already here but the future can stay over the page. It's been a bit like that for me at the recently. I can tell you that the future is a great-unknown, a bit scary really, until I let God tell me that I am not alone. When we think about God's abundant love for us, and the possibilities for our life in God, it gets exciting again.

Our Gospel reading is all about abundant possibilities. The parable of the talents is well-known, but it's worth another look, bearing in mind that a parable is not an allegory, and that every aspect cannot necessarily be interpreted tidily.

What on earth is a talent, in this story? It's a measure of wealth, way too big to fit in your pocket. Each one is worth 6,000 denarii. That's another coin, representing the day's wages paid to a labourer. If we calculate 8 hours at \$13 dollars an hour, that's \$104. Multiply that by 6000 – that's \$624,000. Five of these talents would be worth over \$3 million dollars. It's a huge amount of money, ridiculous really.

Maybe Jesus used this amount to get his audience's attention, and to show that it was a parable, not a true story, and therefore it contained bigger truths than what was apparent in the first layer of the story.

What do these talents represent?

The most obvious meaning for the parable of the talents is to use our ‘talents,’ abilities, or giftings. For example I am a talented singer. I am not talented in other areas, such as sport. Rowan would probably add chess to that list, seeing that he usually beats me! The word that we now use as Talent did come from the same linguistic root as the money talent, which may indicate the value given to talents, as abilities.

Recently at Tawa College there was a musical evening, both to showcase the talents of the students and to farewell their long serving teacher, Shona Murray. A theme that came through in many of the speeches was *using* what God has given us – if we have abilities, we should use them, and pass them on. This teacher has thus inspired many of her pupils to perform publicly and to teach music.

You might ask yourself – what talent do I have? I can’t sing, I would hate to speak in public, what can I do? Whatever abilities you have, God has given them to you, entrusted them to you, like the master in the story – he entrusted the talents to his servants, and left them to it. It doesn’t say in the Bible that he gave them any instructions. He just expected that they would know what to do.

Maybe you can’t paint portraits, or play the saxophone, but you may be an expert scone baker – and there is at least one in this congregation, who regularly blesses our pop-in mums with delicious homemade scones. She is *using* her talent, rather than letting it be hidden away.

We can talk about our abilities, but we have a greater talent, or treasure - our faith, inspired by the Gospel, but if we do not take it out into the world and trade with it, it will not grow. It’s all very well for *us* to be saved, to know that we love Jesus and we will go to heaven, but what about that lot out there? If we take what we have outside *these* walls, and let it be fundamental to our lives, rather than hidden away in our Sunday talk, it will grow. God will give the increase.

The servant who had more was confident to grow it.

Those of us who really have assurance that God is real, the Bible is God speaking to us, and that the Holy Spirit is active in our lives, will trust God for the confidence to go out and live it, so it may grow in other people’s lives.

The servant with fewer talents, with only 2/5ths of the other, still developed it to the same level as the other servant. This one knew that it could grow and double. In fact, in kingdom speak, a two-fold increase is very small – elsewhere we hear of a yield of a hundred, or sixty, or thirty times. This servant, again, shows a willingness to risk an encounter with the world. Abundant risk maybe, but abundant possibilities too.

But you may ask yourself, how can I spread the good news? I am too shy. I wouldn’t know what to say. A recent Word for Today was headed “What’s your excuse?” and it deals with some of the well-known objections, such as : Dreams don’t come true for ordinary people like me. Or: 'If the dream isn't big it's not worth pursuing. No-one told mother Teresa that – she said : 'We can't all do great things, but we can all do

small things with great love.' Or another objection: 'Now is not the right time to pursue my dream.'

Well God can use people who seem unlikely too, like Deborah. We heard a little about her in the reading from the Old Testament. Deborah was a woman of much power, the only female judge of Israel. But here she is giving military orders to her general! This area of warfare may not be a traditional female role, and certainly not in ancient Israel, but don't discount Deborah on that score. In fact, if Deborah *is* inexperienced as a warrior, which seems likely, it is all the more definite that it is indeed God who speaks. She cannot do it in her own strength. She hears from God and brings *God's* message, not her *own*, to General Barak, head of her army. Barak knows it is God who speaks, and he would do well to listen. God can speak through men and women and children, and even on occasion through donkeys!

Her country was really up against it – after twenty years of persecution, the Canaanites were coming with iron chariots, a new technology the Israelites couldn't match. The chariots were a huge problem for their infantry. Nevertheless, the abundant possibilities in the battle were about to go Israel's way. God used Deborah to save her people, because she was willing to let God's words be heard. Barak listened to the word of God through her – I wonder if his namesake listens to God.

When we look at the third servant, he was chastised for not placing his talent with the bankers. Maybe investing it with the bankers could be compared to taking our faith experience and sharing it with other Christians, like a home group experience. We are not breaking new ground, so to speak, but, just as the talent invested with the bankers would earn interest, so sharing our faith with each other brings increase. The last verse of the epistle reading set down for today follows this theme: (1Th 5:11) Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

The servant who did nothing with the talent is like a Christian who knows about God and the kingdom of heaven, but who keeps the knowledge to him or herself. There is no trading, no engagement with others, and no doubling. It just stays in one place, never going anywhere. But you may ask yourself, what can *I* do, *really*?

Preaching on a street corner may not be everyone's cup of tea – in fact it's not even legal in Porirua. St Francis said "Preach the gospel – if necessary use words." He got on with living the gospel, as he fixed up broken-down churches, and tended lepers.

The movement he inspired grew enormously, and took the Christian message as far afield as China in the middle ages, and is still widely active today. One branch of the

Franciscans has a presence at the United Nations, speaking up for justice. You may be thinking, well I *could* do *that*. And that's one of the areas that the AAW is passionate about. Whenever the kingdom of God is advanced, the talent is growing. But if we stand by, mute, and do nothing about the evil of this world, we are like the third servant, who hid the talent, not only did he stop it from growing, he didn't let anyone see it. I'm reminded of the awful case in China recently when a wee tot strayed onto the road and was hit by a car, while people walked by and chose to do nothing. Maybe they were scared of being sued – apparently that is a problem in China at the moment. But the person who helped her was someone who had nothing to lose – a bag lady, who showed compassion. The world was rightly scandalized at this story - , but are we scandalized by stories closer to home, of children who are let down by those they should be able to trust, or people who can't access basic services, because they lack the education to understand the paperwork, or old folk who have no one to give them a ride to the doctor? With an election coming up we do have a chance to consider how we want our country to go on – though I'm not sure that any of those currently up for election prioritize these issues. We often pray the words “we offer ourselves and our lives to your service” in the prayer after communion. Do we really mean it?

Next week's parable, about the sheep and goats, continues this theme of compassion, seeing others as Christ.

What is your talent? Is it something you can do? Is it something you believe in? Or is it who you *are*, a compassionate caring Christian, wanting to be the hands and feet of Jesus in your community. Invest yourselves into your day-to day world, the one you see in the local paper, and bump into in the street, and sit with at the dinner table. This is where our talent, the special thing we are entrusted with, will grow and grow.

Baptism joins us into the body of Christ, and that gives us a responsibility to *be*, rather than *do*, Christianity. As we grow more and more into the image of Christ it becomes obvious how to live. And the first line of today's Psalm guides us how to do that:

To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!