

Blessed are the risk-takers, for they shall receive their reward!

A sermon preached by Father Michael Harper in St Botolph's Orthodox Church in London on February 6th 2005

This Sunday is called the “Sunday of the Talents”; I would suggest that a better and more accurate title should be “Sunday of the Risk-takers.” Today the word “talent” usually means natural gifts. So a “talent spotter” is a person who goes looking for people who excel in sport, academia, marketing and so on. But the Parable of the Talents, which is the reading for the Gospel for this Sunday, is nothing to do with talents as we understand them today. Amazingly, some Bible commentators make this mistake. For the men who are given “talents” are in fact given some capital; but it is never theirs – it always belongs to their Master.

In the Greek language the word for interest, or usury as it used to be called, is *tokos*, which literally means “offspring”. When it is linked with the Greek word for God – *Theos*, it is a prominent name for the Mother of God. The title “Theotokos” comes frequently in the Divine Liturgy. Interest or usury, in other words is the fruit of capital investment, its “offspring”: money and capital, should be seen as living things. The third servant, who took the capital given to him and hid it in the ground, treated the capital as “dead” – for you only bury dead things. Professor Tasker writes that “interest is the child of capital.”

Two approaches to investment

Let us now look at this Parable and apply it to two diametrically different approaches to lending. This weekend the G7 leaders from the seven most prosperous nations in the world are meeting in London. Our Prime Minister Tony Blair and the Chancellor Gordon Brown are putting forward proposals for further investment in Africa. They are suggesting a figure of £1 billion as this country's contribution. Professor Niall Ferguson, the Professor of History at Harvard University in the United States, wrote an article on this subject which was published yesterday in the *Daily Telegraph*. He reported that in the period 1950-1995 over \$1 trillion has been given to Africa in Aid, with pitiable results. Much of this vast sum of money has leaked back to the West either in the form of large investments in Swiss Banks, or as large sums spent on armaments, which have been bought from the West. The Professor writes that

about 80% of all this Aid since the 50s has in fact flowed back to the West. If the West were to be judged on the principles of the Parable of the Talents, it would be categorised as the servant who hid his talents in the ground.

The second approach is as different as chalk from cheese. Some years ago an Englishman went to Africa determined to help poor Africans in their personal economic situations. Where he saw an economic need he personally lent that person a capital sum of money. For instance a man who was marketing his produce, he would lend him, say, £100 to buy a decent market stall. The sums were always quite small, always personally given, and always treated as a loan. He told the people that he would come back in a year or so and reclaim the loan. He reported that very seldom was that money not returned to him, and that in most instances the free loans greatly benefited those who received them, and had helped to lift them out of abject poverty.

I think you will agree with me that this is a better way of doing it – and fits well into the category of the first two in the Parable who were commended for the way they had handled the capital loans, producing good results from their investments.

Risk is the key to this Parable

At the heart of this Parable is the element of risk, which is always part of financial enterprise and any investment policy. The first two servants took risks; the third didn't. And Jesus Christ, in telling this Parable, is encouraging us to take risks.

So let us look at some risk-takers.

1 St Paul

The first that springs to mind is St Paul because of the Epistle reading for this Sunday. In describing his ministry St Paul tells the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 6), about his constant risk-taking – he writes “through great endurance, afflictions, hardships, beatings, hunger. . . honour and dishonour. . . treated as imposters and yet true, as dying and see, we are alive, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing, and yet possessing everything”.

Why all this risk-taking? Because Paul refused to hide in the ground what God gave to him, the glorious gospel of the grace of God, but like the faithful servants in the Parable he traded the gospel which produced for him and the Church many “offspring” – and much suffering.

2 St Peter

For the second risk-taker, let us recall the behaviour of St Peter on the Day of Pentecost. At 9 o'clock in the morning the gathered Church was filled with the Holy Spirit, and overflowed with worship and joy. They might well have claimed a few days off to enjoy what they had just received, but instead they were confronted, after Peter's sermon, with a crowd of 3000 people who wanted to become Christians. Can't one hear some of the apostles going to Peter and urging him to be cautious. “Peter be careful! 3000 people will swamp the Church. They will take it over. They will lower our standards and corrupt our teaching. Let's just receive a few at a time, so we can keep control of the situation.” Thank God, Peter took no notice of them – 3000 raw recruits were baptised and added to the Church in one day.

3 His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatius IV

The third example is contemporary and close to hand. Ten years ago our beloved Patriarch was faced with a situation when a number of former Anglican priests wanted to become Orthodox. No doubt the same arguments we imagined on the Day of Pentecost were used against our being received. “They will spoil our Church. They will bring their Anglican heresies with them. They will lower our Orthodox standards.” But to his eternal credit the Patriarch ignored all such arguments, and took the risk.

Risk-taking is at the heart of the Christian Faith. Someone once said that for Christians, faith is spelt R - I - S - K. Jesus again and again emphasised risk, and took enormous risks himself. He risked the future of the Church by appointing the Twelve, one of whom was to betray Him. Jesus once described risk in these words, “those who find their life shall lose it, and those who lose their life for My sake will find it.”

The day of judgement

The warm approval in this Parable of the first two servants, the “well done” of the Master, is unique in both the New Testament and the Septuagint. The words, “enter into the joy of your Master” are also

unique in the New Testament. But how will we get on when Christ returns at the end of the age?

Let the Orthodox be careful. The danger will be that we will claim to have “preserved the faith of the apostles” – to have kept it untarnished and intact after 20 centuries, as if that is the sum total of our stewardship. Rightly in the Divine Liturgy we pray that God may “preserve the fullness of the Church.”

But in essence, as this Parable teaches us, the Church is not basically a preservation society, though it does preserve the fullness of the Church. It is a caring and sharing body of people who, while preserving faithfully the apostle’s doctrine, do not hide that teaching in the ground, but share it with all and sundry, as Peter, Paul and His Beatitude have done from the 1st Century to the 21st. Like them we are to be risk-takers, and when we are – we will not lose our reward.