

# Homily on the parable of the talents

*by Kaihsu Tai on November 16th, 2008*

Matthew 25:14–30 ( $\approx$  Luke 19:12–27)

I walk down High Street and I see a sign: ‘Good news! Your debts paid – free of charge.’ If I see it in a bank window, I might well think of alerting the Financial Services Authority and the Advertising Standards Authority. But if it says ‘Jesus pays for my debt, and yours too! Come in for the Good News!’ in a church window like ours, I might not think twice. Well, maybe it is time to think twice! Maybe such statements need to be considered not just metaphorically, but literally.

What about today’s reading? If I wanted bad news, it is not difficult to find them in the newspapers. When I want good news, I find it from Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But where is the good news in today’s parable? The weeping and gnashing of teeth do not sound like it. I struggle to look for the good news, whilst reading the bad news from the newspapers – banks are not lending to each other, and to people who need loans. Then the master’s suggestion to the third slave of investing in – or lending to – the banks almost sound like the macroeconomic prescriptions from the ilk of the Governor of the Bank of England, Mervin King and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling: ‘We gave you all these billions of pounds, now go get it moving out there!’

Maybe the good news lies in this suggestion: Money is not at all useful if buried in the ground, but – in the idea of John Maynard Keynes and many others – the worst thing you can do with money is accumulate it and not spend it, not to give it away or get it moving somehow. Remember that dishonest manager in the other parable? He earned his master’s praise by cancelling debts ... and he made lots of friends in the process!

Now back to High Street. This Thursday at Church Meeting, we were asked to consider an interest-free loan of five thousand pounds to the Oxford Credit Union. It was indeed a difficult decision to make, and I am sorry that I was not here with the Church Meeting in your deliberations. Well, since it is interest-free, we might not do as well financially as the first and second slaves in the parable, who got twice the money they started with. But with the support we are already giving to the Oxford Credit Union ... plus our future support, in whatever form ... we hope the Body of Christ is literally helping some people in Oxford manage their money and their debts in a better way. So maybe the message of the Cross, the message of this bread and this wine, is worth sticking up in a church window after all. Maybe it can withstand the scrutiny of the Advertising Standards Authority after all. ‘Jesus pays for my debt, and yours too! Come in for the Good News!’

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The Worthlessness of Gold – A Meditation by Chris Mann

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

We live in a society and a world where to be wealthy is promoted as the primary focus of our lives and the only way to achieve personal fulfilment. Success, we are lead to believe, can be measured in bank notes, gold and silver. As people we place large artificial values on the precious metals that hold our fragile economy together and provide us with material possessions.

Zephaniah challenges our lust for wealth in his passage about the second coming of Jesus, what he calls “The Great Day of the Lord”. In the verses we have just heard, Zephaniah describes how the wealthy and the complacent will be punished by God for having taken their focus off him and instead concentrated on the pursuit of their own personal material gain. “Their wealth will be plundered, their houses demolished...Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord’s wrath” writes the Prophet.

Zephaniah also expresses the anger God has towards people who are, in his words, “complacent” – but what exactly does this mean? In this context we see “complacent” people as those who have enjoyed wealth and yet have not made an effort to share with those less fortunate than themselves. The Prophet warns that “They will build houses but not live in them; they will plant vineyards but not drink the wine.” We can also interpret the “complacent” as those who have chosen to ignore God’s message, Zephaniah writes that they are those “who think, ‘The Lord will do nothing, either good or bad’”.

But what message should we take from Zephaniah’s stark warning? I believe God is telling us to be modest and humble in the way we live our lives and that we should avoid becoming preoccupied with chasing what is ultimately worthless wealth. Unlike our relationship with God, gold will be worthless when we come to the end of our lives. Through Zephaniah, God is urging us to become wealthy not in gold or silver but in spirit, and to concentrate on developing a strong and meaningful relationship with him. For it is only through God that we can achieve the true wealth of spiritual fulfilment, personal peace and eternal life.

To orient ourselves away from a preoccupation with material wealth is not easy, in fact it is a hugely counter-cultural thing to do. We need to prioritise for ourselves and make God’s grace and

love for others the centrepiece of our lives in the midst of a popular culture which tells us to only think of the self. It is always difficult to swim against the tide, but the realisation that there is more to this life than, as Zephaniah puts it, “gold and silver”, will strip away from our lives the numerous distractions that prevent us from connecting with a gracious and loving God.

If we are able to look beyond a media obsessed by wealth and image, if we are able to live within our means, if we are able to know ourselves and know our God then we are living and breathing his message in the world today.

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Reflection on I Thessalonians V: 1-11.

Julia Koepe

In this letter that Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, we are at least given a brighter picture than the one given in the passage from Zephaniah. Paul emphasizes that because we are children of light, we need not fear the coming of the Lord. However, he says that we still need to be aware of and ready for the coming of the Lord, and that we need to help and encourage one another. Now, Paul was writing to the church in Thessalonica because they were having some problems. These new Christians were being persecuted by the non-Christians around them, and they didn't have much direction. Some of the people there were convinced that Jesus would return very soon, so they had quit doing their work and everything else in order to wait for Him. Our church may not be in as much trouble as theirs, but I think that Paul's letter can still tell us something. We do need to be prepared, and we need to help and encourage each other. We need to use the gifts that God has given us to do the best that we can. Each one of us has different things to share. Some help by giving their time. Others help by sharing various talents. And still others help with gifts of money. I think anything we can do to help and encourage each other and others helps us to be prepared for the coming of the Lord. And by working to do God's will, we prevent ourselves from resting on

our laurels and from becoming complacent while waiting for the day of the Lord. By using whatever God has given us to the best of our abilities, we remain aware and demonstrate that we are, indeed, children of light.

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## **Prayers (bailiffs)**

*by Kaihsu Tai on November 16th, 2008*

Will you pray with me?  
Let us pray.

1

God, we pray for the world.

The prayer cycle of the World Council of Churches reminds us to pray today for the peoples of Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and Equatorial Guinea. We also pray at this time for the Democratic Republic of Congo and for Rwanda, for those people displaced from their homes due to the conflict, for the peacekeepers and diplomats working in a difficult situation.

Today we [remember all the road traffic victims](#), on the day designated for this remembrance.

Lord, in your mercy,  
hear our prayer.

2

God, we pray for the banks in this time of financial turmoil. We pray for all the computers in the investment banks and in the stock exchanges, silently carrying out all the financial and stock transactions, throughout the day, without many people noticing. We pray for the bankers, especially those who design trading algorithms and decide on loans. Remind them that it is real people's lives that are affected by their decisions.

We recall that Jesus said to the rich young man, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

We look for the day when we can say to the [London Stock Exchange](#) as Jesus said to Zacchaeus: 'Today salvation has come to this house.'

Lord, in your mercy,  
hear our prayer.

3

God, we pray for the debt collection agencies,  
and the [bailiffs](#) who have to knock on doors to collect debts.  
May they do their work  
with compassion, common sense, and sensitivity.

Remind them from time to time of Jesus' parable,  
in which the master commended the dishonest manager,  
who acted shrewdly, by forgiving debts and making friends.

Lord, in your mercy,  
hear our prayer.

4

God, we pray for those who find it hard to understand  
what is really going on.  
We pray for those who are anxious at this time.

Remind them that Jesus said  
'Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness,  
and all these things will be given to you as well.'  
Jesus said,  
'Do not worry about tomorrow,  
for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.  
Today's trouble is enough for today.'

We also pray for the teachers, scholars, and journalists  
who struggle to explain things clearly to the public.

Remind them that Jesus said,  
'You are not to be called rabbi,  
for you have one teacher, and you are all students.'  
Jesus said,  
'The greatest among you will be your servant.'

Lord, in your mercy,  
hear our prayer.

5

God, we pray for the Church, which is the Body of Christ.

We thank you for the Wessex Synod meeting last weekend.  
The Wessex Synod prayer handbook reminds us to pray today  
for the congregations in Maidenhead and in Walton-on-Thames.

At this time, we pray particularly for  
Richard van Houten,  
General Secretary of the Reformed Ecumenical Council, and  
Setri Nyomi,  
General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.  
We rejoice that these two groups will unite in 2010  
to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

We pray for the many Christian traditions represented  
in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

May they remember to be  
a sign of reconciliation in a divided world.

We recall that Jesus prayed  
'That they [the Church] may all be one.'

Lord, in your mercy,  
hear our prayer.

6

God, we pray for the Kwayambunga Community Project in Zambia.  
We pray for the Oxford Credit Union,  
and we pray for our continued consideration  
about how best to support it.

We pray for Asylum Welcome and the Community Emergency Foodbank  
and the food we donate to them.

Bless every penny of the money we have  
and every morsel of the food we give,  
every tube of toothpaste, every bar of soap,  
that they may multiply as the yeast, as the mustard seed,  
and further your kingdom in unexpected places.

May our work in co-operation with other churches in this city  
be helpful and healing actions done by the Body of Christ,  
moved by your Spirit in your world.

Lord, in your mercy,  
hear our prayer.

All these things we pray,  
in the name of Jesus our Saviour,  
Amen.