

Medicine of the Person

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Bible study 2

Rutger MEIJER (NL)

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Conscience and common sense

(Matthew 25.14-30)

We have just heard one of the best-known parables in the Gospels, about the talents. And I have the impression that, just as the flickering of the eyes is the last reflex remaining in a dying person, this parable survives the longest in the memory of an ancient wise man, urging him to exploit his gifts. The believer agrees with this exegesis, but adds: in the service of the kingdom of God.

So, to make the most of one's life in the service of the kingdom of God.

The parable appears twice in the Gospels. In one of the two versions, each of the servants only receives one talent; in the other, the number of talents differs. The one talent represents the Gospel, because it also is unique. The other version places the emphasis on our aptitudes and our zeal. At the end of the parable, each servant who has turned his talent to good account, is called just, is praised and invited to rejoice with his master. Except the servant who buried his talent. If you had put the talent in the bank, you could have returned it to me with interest, says the master to the indifferent and lazy servant. And he sends him away with these words; 'I do not know you'. That is his punishment. God does not trust him anymore. And so, how important is it for us to be known by God?

God does not demand too much from us, he accepts our weaknesses and our individuality, but God is unyielding when it comes to an absolute refusal to obey. God uses imperfect human beings to continue his creation. In spite of our defects creation continues. Or, as one might say; one can still walk straight with a crooked cane.

The story of Matthew 19; 1-19 deals with divorce or separation. Jesus says that ideally, marriage should never be dissolved, but in practice, the priests recognised that marriage could be unbearable and accepted divorce. Here, it isn't idealism which dictates the response but the acceptance of reality and common sense which prevails over the ideal, in the service of mercy and of humanity.

Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and these things will be added unto you, because I know what you need. It isn't down to us to fulfil God's promises. He has promised us that creation will result in a prosperous and peaceful world. It is up to us to contribute to that by our own free will. It is the Alliance between God and people. The Alliance should inspire us to modesty since we are only helpers and it inspires pride in us because we are working in the service of God.

But the Alliance also stops us from being complacent or retreating into our comfort zone. Here I see a plea for moderation and the middle road. For me, faith places me between extremism and complacency. For me, the Alliance is primarily an invitation to work for peace and prosperity in the world around us, knowing that God is not far and that He isn't in the storm but in the gentle wind.

And this moderate path is put under pressure in these times where all-out extremism is gaining ground. Probably because no one believes anymore that God reigns... and because man has become responsible for everything. The possibility of choosing extremism exists in the church as well. I encounter the extreme also in the refusal to face reality. An everyday example; during a meeting with European dairy farmers, Pope Francis denounces the never-ending growth of farms and their herds. I would have preferred him to show how to an end the dilemma of low prices, followed by an increase in production, followed by lowering of the price etc. Or instead, I would have preferred him to say simply that he shares their pain.

If I am citing real everyday examples, it is because, according to the Talmud, advice must be practicable and doable.

Another example of the polarisation between utopia and indifference: the conflict between Chancellor Merkel and her counterpart Mr Orban. In other words, the polarisation between inviting unlimited Syrian refugees to come to Germany without first consulting her European colleagues against the categorical refusal of Mr Orban to admit them. I suspect that this question will still be just as current when we meet together.

On this subject, a Dutch rabbi wrote an article in a newspaper with a big circulation entitled; The Bible imposes conditions on refugees.¹

The writer searched the Old Testament for instructions relating to refugees.

Hospitality towards refugees is mandatory in the Jewish tradition. The Old Testament says: 'You were strangers and refugees in Egypt.' But are we therefore obliged to accept every refugee who asks to come in?

If it is probable that the refugee will never earn their living (which is the case in 60%), a government has to limit the number it allows in order to cap the costs.

Those who have sought shelter from a war or a famine can be sent back, once peace has returned or the famine resolved.

While the Jews were exiled in Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 9; 7) urged them to increase Babylon's prosperity.

If we look for a balance between the interests of the host country and the refugee, we should always give priority to those who are in danger of dying. Therefore, life always wins out over death. And the weak have priority over the stronger. But if the two parties are equivalent and refugees and existing residents start competing to obtain housing or work, the authorities can give priority to someone from that town or country. For the authorities, the interests of their population need to be considered as well.

I find this clear and sober analysis, rooted in reality and mercy, more appealing than the inextricable imbroglio of charity, blame and self-interest of employers and of the politically correct and the absolute refusal to admit refugees, which currently dominate the discussions about refugees.

I come back to the theme of our conference: Who decides?

Look for the two polar extremes between which we must place our answer. The likeliest is that neither extreme is the right answer. Look for the middle path. But there will always be a tension between clear conscience and common sense. And that tension, caused by our imperfection, should inspire in us a certain modesty.

In our church there is a hymn² which expresses that tension with a phrase which I like : 'Why God, did you bring me that uncertainty in my blood – Is it that which is Grace ?'

¹ Rabin Evers in the newspaper 'Trouw', 8th September 2015

² Ad den Beste - Hymn 484 Liedbundel 1974 : Why should I hear your voice ?