

'Ave a go, ya mug!

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Sermon

"Ave a go, ya mug" – a familiar Australian expression, an expression that suggests that even a "mug" is capable of 'having a go'. It also suggests that being a "mug" is not an excuse for not having a go. "I'm not good enough" or "leave it to the experts" is no excuse, and in today's reading this is exactly what Jesus is saying when the master challenges his servants to 'ave a go'.

In the Gospel of Matthew there's a point that he makes over and over again, particularly in the last chapters – that point being *"be awake, for you never know of the time when the Messiah will return"*. And he has a strong anti-Pharisee theme throughout his book, using them repeatedly as the classic example of those who talk the talk, but fail to walk the walk.

Matthew 25 has two parables, both of which relate to the return of the Messiah, and the nature of the judgment at that time. Last week's parable about ten young women who had the job of waving oil lamps when the bridegroom arrived at a wedding reception, again reiterates Matthew's point that you never know the exact time when the bridegroom will appear, and you can't always pick those who are prepared and those who are not, the real disciples from the pretenders. And when he does arrive he will sort them out. Some will be found faithful and true, and some will be shown to have been trying to fudge it on second-hand discipleship.

"The parable of the talents" is a similar story. A wealthy businessman heads off on a holiday and entrusts three employees with vast sums of his investment funds to do with them as they see fit. Anyone here know how much a talent was worth? A couple of years ago I did some research based on the weight of gold, weighed up some gold coins and figured out that a talent in today's money was around \$12,000. Well, I can do better! My research based on wages rather than weight tells us that in Jesus' day a talent was simply a very large unit of money, about fifteen years wages for the average labourer, which these days equates to almost \$1,000,000!

\$12,000 or \$1,000,000, it matters not, it's simply a very large sum of money to entrust with others. And consider the people with whom he was entrusting his money. They were not bankers, property managers, businessmen or financial advisors, but according to Jesus they were the man's slaves, the man's "mugs" if you like, simple people whom the master trusted. Effectively what he was saying to them was "Ave a go ya mugs!" and we all know the outcome.

I remember years ago attending a business conference in my capacity as Sales Manager for the Baldwin Piano & Organ Company. As part of the 'fun and games' we gave each attendee 100 "Baldwin Bucks", pretend money like Monopoly money. Each person then had the task of making as much money as possible by whatever means for the duration of the conference. Items we bought and sold, people arriving late for a conference session could be fined, you could be fined for wearing your tie crookedly, dropping a pen on the floor, yawning or nodding off to sleep during a presentation. Golf and tennis players pooled their bucks and played for prize money, others sat around until late into the night playing cards and gambling for "Baldwin Bucks" – the parable of the talents all over again.

On the final night a prize was to be awarded for the one had who made the most money during the week. The results were most interesting and said much about the personalities of those attending. For the most part people lost or gained a few bucks here and there. No big gains or losses. There were those who thought it was just a silly game, put their bucks aside and ended up with exactly what they started out with.

But there was one man who had made considerably more money than the others and looked like getting first prize. When asked what his secret was, his answer was quite simple – *“I never missed an opportunity. Every time someone yawned or sneezed I fined them. Every time someone couldn’t find a pen I sold them one of mine. Every person who said an unkind word about someone or something was severely fined. I never missed an opportunity”*.

We were about to give him first prize when another gentleman stepped up with a pile of Baldwin Bucks twice the size of the first gentleman. How did he do it? *“Well, I have a confession to make. Whenever someone left their money unattended, I simply stole it. If a brief case was left open and money was in sight, I stole it. If someone left their bedroom door open and I could see money lying there, I stole it”*. Well, he did admit that his method was a bit unfair and downright dishonest, and therefore he didn’t really deserve the prize.

Once again we were just about to give the first man his prize when a third gentleman stepped up with an even bigger pile than the first two put together. The pile was so big that he to tie it tightly with pieces of string. How could he make so much? *“Cut the string and you’ll find out”*. Carefully cutting the string the pile of notes fell across the table, and there as plain as day was the answer. The top few notes were genuine Baldwin Bucks, the bottom few notes were genuine Baldwin Bucks, but the notes in between? - pieces of blank white paper cut to the exact size of a Baldwin Buck to give the impression that they were real. Much hilarity and he too admitted that his method was dishonest, and the first man received his prize.

These days the word talent has come to mean an ability or a gift, rather than a sum of money, and heaven spare us the plethora of talent or ability shows we see on TV – America’s Got Talent, Britain’s Got Talent, Australia’s Got Talent, The X Factor, Dancing With The Stars, So You Think You Can Sing? – the list goes on....

In this morning’s story the master gave money to his slaves *‘according to their abilities’*, So I see this story not so much as a money making exercise but as a challenge for the employees to put their abilities to work. *“here’s some money, ave a go ya mugs – let’s see what you can do with it!”* And so the end result is not about how much money each made, but about how willing they were to put their abilities to work. And isn’t this what Jesus is asking us to do right here today?

The focus of the story naturally falls on the reasons why the third man did nothing with his money. He explains it himself saying, *“I knew you were only too happy to reap the profits from other people’s work without contributing yourself, and I know how harsh you are on those who fail; so I was afraid. I kept your money locked away safely. Here, have it back.”*

And the master gets cross. But do you think this is a fair view of his boss? I don't, in fact I think that he was completely misjudging his boss. The boss wasn't reaping where he did not sow and skimming the profits off other people's work without putting anything in himself (*like the man who stole the Baldwin Bucks*) Not at all. The boss put all the money in himself. He had clearly sown. The profits he reaped were from his own money.

The trouble with this third guy is that he doesn't recognise a gift when it is handed to him on a plate. And because he can't recognise the gift, or the generosity of the gift-giver, he lives his life in fear that this is some sort of test. This is the person who sees God as the harsh judge in the sky, watching us for mistakes and eager to find a reason to condemn us. And so, fearful of slipping up, such a person never risks engaging with the fullness of living.

God recognises that we are all different. Some of us got a dream start in life and others were born into a living hell. Some of us have known nothing but love, and others have been ripped off and trampled on all along the way. God knows that we have all been dealt differing hands in life. Note that the boss in Jesus's story did not condemn the second worker for only generating a profit of two talents when his mate had generated five. They were equally rewarded from making the best they could from where they started out. The only one condemned was the one who did not 'ave a go'.

So the question to us is - what are we doing with our gifts? Matthew, through Jesus' parables is challenging us to make sure it is not just words. We've got to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. Are your talents like the man who won the prize at the business conference – honest and hard earned and "*never missed an opportunity*" to employ his talent? Or are they like the one who simply stole a dollar here and a dollar there from others? Or are they like the man who made fake money and who LOOKED like he had talent.

This week I've been reflecting on the 131 years of worship by this church in Mentone, and wondering how many people must have passed through this church in that time. There must have been many tens of thousands, and what talents they must have had and employed to bring us here today? If we were to place a monetary value on their talents, even at \$12,000 a talent, I reckon trillions of dollars' worth of talent must gone into worshipping God and bring His good news to the people of Mentone. And we still have billions of dollars' worth of talent sitting here right now.

As we move forward into the next phase of worship, what talents and precious gifts can we take with us, and what talents will be required of us as we begin our new phase of worship and mission?

We have all been given 'natural' or God given talents, but I believe the greatest talent we can have is to allow God into our lives, and allow God to use HIS talent through us.

The parable tells us NOT to sit on the God within us, but keep our spiritual oil in good supply, keeping the flame alive so that people can see God's light in us.

To keep God locked away inside us is in effect to not trust God. Matthew wants us to share God's adventure through us. We need to encourage people to stop putting God under the mattress. As we begin to trust and allow God to move through us, our lives change as individuals and our communities have a better chance of change. There are rich pickings, so to speak, and the harvest is ripe.

We are all but humble servants of the master. We all have his God given talents, especially the gift of allowing him into our lives.

To use a modern expression - "The ball is at our feet – ave a go ya mugs"