

When we track the results from the Australian Census over perhaps the last twenty years, we see that when it comes to the question about religion, the fastest growing category is those who claim that they don't belong to any religion. One way to try to understand the meaning of data like this is to consider how people relate to God and how belief in God shapes the way they live.

We live in a society where some people reject any belief in God and live their lives as if there is no God. Other people have a strong belief in God, but they also live in fear of God. This is a view that has been strong in all theistic religions. These people see God as almighty and all-powerful, and for them, life is focused on keeping God happy. This sort of attitude was common in primitive religions, and we see something like this in some sections of the Old Testament. But there are also people with a different understanding of God. These people see God as watching over them and protecting them. While there is respect of God in this view, there is no fear or terror.

I think we see these two understandings of God on display in the parable in today's gospel. Of the three servants, the third one sees his master as hard and demanding. He lives in fear of the master. In fact, he seems to be paralysed by fear. He seems to have lost any freedom to act and to do good. He simply buries the talent he received. The imagery in the parable is about money and investment. We don't need to be in high finance to know that if you simply bury your money, its value will diminish. So, the point Jesus is making is that this servant wasted the gifts he had received; rather than grow, he went backwards. Jesus is telling a parable about the kingdom of God, and the point he is making is to his listeners is that they will be like this servant if their understanding of God is limited. Rather than seeing God as giving him gifts and giving him life, the servant was terrified and wasted his life. Of course, we see a very different attitude in the other two servants. They graciously received what they were given, and they produced fruit.

We might ask ourselves: what is the basic message that Jesus wanted to convey in this parable. I believe that the basic message is about God and God's relationship to us. That message is that God trusts us. I think this is a consistent message throughout the Bible. We see it right back at the creation of the world in the Book of Genesis. When God creates the

man and the woman, he entrusts the earth to them to care for it. With trust comes freedom. This is always the challenging piece. We saw in the Book of Genesis that the man and the woman didn't know how to use their freedom, and they broke God's trust. This is the drama that all human beings face: how to use their freedom to honour God's trust in them.

If the story of the Fall in the Book of Genesis showed the misuse of freedom, then today's parable shows us that to fail to use our freedom at all is also to break God's trust. The servant who buried the treasure opted for a so-called safe life, but it ended up being no life at all. On the other hand, the other two servants showed how freedom can be used well to honour God's trust and to produce fruit. They used what they had been given to bring benefit to the master. If we apply this to religious experience, we would say that they used the gifts God had given them to give glory to God and to bring goodness to others.

This does not have to be complicated. I think the first reading gives us an insight into what this might look like. This time we have the image of a wife who runs the household. She goes about her daily tasks, and these keep the family together. She is practical. Because of her activity, people are fed, and they have clothes to wear. And even when this is all done, there is still more. The "interest" she earns, as it were, on her work means that there is something left for the poor.

These readings today invite us to recognise how God has gifted us. We could think of this in terms of particular talents we might have, but even more fundamental would be to see our whole life as God's gift. When we understand life as a gift from God, then we will also recognise that God has entrusted us with this life. God trusts us and gives us the freedom to live our life in such a way as to bring good to the world that God has created. This is not necessarily about being heroic, but about living well every day. In this, we give glory to God and we love our neighbour.