

NINETEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Luke 12:32-48

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Peter said, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?” And the Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that slave says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful. That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

REFLECTION 1: FAITH WITHOUT GOOD DEEDS

In today’s Gospel (Luke 12: 32-48) we are told to be ready immediately when the master comes and knocks. We have all been present at the start of a race and are familiar with the words, ‘Ready, Set, Go’ and the most important of these commands is the first ‘Ready’. Ready means months and years of practice and conditioning – ready means a commitment to training. It means to take action and to be alert. The Greek philosopher Aristotle tells us that ‘we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not only an act but a habit.’

This brings us to the servants in today’s Gospel. In Jesus’ time, if the host of a banquet was rich, then the feasting could go on for several days so those waiting servants could have no idea when the master would return. Jesus would say to us through this story that we, the people of God, must be like those wise servants who didn’t give in to fatigue or displayed irritation or was disruptive. We are to keep the light burning and in a constant state of readiness to spring up at a moment’s notice and joyously welcome their master home – this is putting faith into action. It is this action that causes the most shocking twists in the parable. The master was so moved by the faithful actions of his servants that instead of sitting down at table to be served, he dresses himself to wait on them! It was not the words that caused the master to wait on them, but their actions done in love.

In Ireland there are 19,000 sudden and unexpected deaths each year – Christ comes for so many at an hour that they do not expect or at an hour of their own choosing. This is painfully true when we lose a loved one to death that comes like a thief in the night to burgle the bank of life. On the other hand, Christ can make his presence known in the little things of life, the kind word, the loving embrace, the job opportunity and in our hopes and dreams. In all these encounters it is our actions that help our faith to live. When we support the bereaved, when we help the poor and desolate, when we reach out to one another – that is putting action behind our faith. When we go to work and give 100%, when we offer a smile to a neighbour although we ourselves are discouraged – that is putting action behind faith. Even by our presence in church today, we are putting our action behind our faith. It is waiting for the one we call master, with our lamps burning brightly, shining for the world to see.

St. James tells us (James 2:20) that faith without deeds is dead. Listen to what he wrote, 'You senseless people, do you not realise that faith without good deeds is useless ... faith is dead if it is separated from good deeds'.

Jesus showed his faith in his heavenly Father when he united us in his one mighty act, the passion and resurrection, represented to us in the Eucharist. So, let us be an Easter people of action beyond the four walls of our churches, but in the world, let us be people, who as Aristotle told us, will achieve the excellence God wants by making a habit of putting our faith into action. Blessed John XXIII used to say that he was never afraid of death, his bags he said, were always packed.

REFLECTION 2: 'YOU TOO MUST STAND READY'

You have just heard the shorter version of today's Gospel, Luke 12: 35-40, not for brevity sake but for its simplicity. The passage has two senses. In its narrower sense it refers to the second coming of Jesus Christ and in its widest sense it refers to the time when God's summons enters a person's life - a call to meet God. There is also praise for the servant who is ready.

The long flowing robes worn in the Middle East were a hindrance to work, so, one had to gather up one's clothes to be free for activity. The type of lamp referred to was a bob of cotton floating on a sauce-boat of oil, the wick would have to be trimmed and the lamp replenished or the light would go out. No one can tell the day or the hour when eternity will invade time and the call will come. How then would we like God to find us? Surely with our work completed. Life for so many of us is filled with loose ends, there are things left undone, things only half done and even things postponed. Jesus reminds us that we should always have that sense of a task that must be concluded. The poet Keats wrote, 'when I have fears that I may cease to be, before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain?'. Jesus himself said 'I glorify you on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do' (Jn. 17:4). No one should ever lightly leave undone a task that ought to be finished by nightfall.

We would like God to find us at peace with one another. It would be a haunting thing to pass from this world in bitterness with a neighbour or a relative. We should never allow the sun to go down on our anger - least of all the last sun of all; and we may never know what day that will be.

We should like God to find us at peace with him - that we are not going out to meet a stranger or an enemy, but rather going out to greet our best friend. In the second section of this passage, Jesus draws a picture of the wise and the unwise steward. In the Middle East the steward had great power, he controlled the workers under him while administering the estate. He would always be aware of anyone breaking into his Master's property. There is a part of us when we remember that God is present and another side of us that never thinks of him at all. We tend to draw a line between the sacred and the secular. But if we really know what Christianity means, we will know that there is no part in life when the master is away - we are working and living in God's presence. Jesus said, I must work the works of him who sent me, while it is still day, night is coming when no one can work (Jn. 9:14). There is nothing so fatal as to think that we have plenty of time. There is a small statue in the sacristy at Crosschapel - it is an image of an early Roman martyr, St. Expeditus. It depicts a Roman soldier, showing his left foot crushing a crow, the bird protests by squawking 'cras' - which in Latin means 'tomorrow'. In the meantime, the Saint holds a simple cross, with the words inscribed 'hodie' meaning 'to-day' in Latin.

