

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus told this parable to his disciples: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who, before going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

REFLECTION 1:

LIVING EACH DAY

If you were diagnosed today with having a terminal illness with only about six months to live, how would that knowledge affect you? What difference would it make in your life? When the Anglican Bishop John Robinson received similar news in 1983, we are told that his first reaction was of shock. He planned to cancel all arrangements in his diary. Then, on mature reflection, he decided to get the most of the six months while life was on offer. Cancer patients, we are told, live with a lot of extra enjoyment because they face bravely their fear of death. As the Liturgical Year is winding down and a new one begins on the 30th of this month, our focus is directed to what is terminal. None of us can ignore or waste the finality that death brings. Death reminds us that we are to accept each day as a gift, to become all we can and to do all we can for as many people as God places on our path. The declining year presses upon us to make the most of the present moment, for it is in his moment alone, we can be assured of the grace to live that moment fully.

The woman featured in today's first reading (Proverbs) inspires us to view well all the moments we are given. She illustrates the silent greatness that can be achieved in doing ordinary things with great care. As a good wife and mother she leaves a lasting memory through her cooking, her housework and by reaching out to those less fortunate.

Paul (Second Reading) shared with the Thessalonians what he also shares with us; the necessity of living in the present moment – to live alert and sober in the revealing light of truth and not to have any regrets or have things to be ashamed of when time is no more.

Today's Gospel (Mt. 25: 14-30) describes something of the daring and devotion required of believers who wish to make the most of every moment. Jesus' parable reminds each of us that we have been given gifts to use, develop and share. Not all gifts are the same. But all are valuable and given to each one of us uniquely. The servants who were given various shares in their master's possessions did not know how long they would have to use them to the best advantage. Two made the most of what they had and were invited to invest more with their master, while the other failed to use the gift he had been given.

Some years ago, I compiled what I entitled as '**A Philosophy of Life**'; it reflects the themes in today's liturgy. 'I will greet each day with joy in my heart. I will welcome everybody I meet with friendship, as a brother or sister in whom the spirit of God dwells. I will be conscious of the fact that every hour, every minute of the day, is a special instalment on life's allotted span and that every moment bears a satchel on its back with only the grace to live that moment to the full. I will not agonise over the lost opportunities of the past or fantasise over the dreams of tomorrow'.

REFLECTION 2:

DEPOSITING OUR TALENTS

A famous rugby coach once said to his buddies in the squad, 'Don't let what you can't do, interfere with what you can do'. It reminds me of a story I read about Booker Washington, a black American slave. At the age of 16 he walked over 500 miles from his slave home to Hampton, Virginia. When he got there he was told that the classes were filled.

Undaunted, he took a job at the college doing menial jobs; sweeping floors and making beds. He did these so well that the faculty found room for him as a student. He worked his way up at the college and became a famous lecturer, professor and eventually founded a university. I believe this story tells us that small jobs, done well, can lead to a top job.

This brings us to today's Gospel parable known as the 'parable of the talents' (Matt:25:14-30). It encourages us to make good use of our gifts of nature and grace, little or great. Jesus is speaking to us of his coming, on a day and at an hour that no one knows. So, we must be alert, so as not to be taken by surprise at this event. We have a task to accomplish in the meantime. Christians readily understand that Jesus is speaking of himself. We say in the Creed each Sunday at mass; 'He ascended into heaven He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead'. 'Till that day dawns, Jesus has entrusted us, his disciples, with his goods. These 'goods' are mentioned in the Gospel and are referred to as talents, a monetary unit used to handle large sums. I saw some of these talents in the history museum in Athens and they reminded me of our old 56lb weights, only these were of silver – a very large sum indeed, worth about €100,000 in present day currency. So the servants in the parable received invaluable capital according to each one's capacity. The parable does not say how the first two servants managed to invest their master's capital. He congratulates them on the same terms and invites them into his joy. He praises them for having been faithful 'in small matters' and promises them 'greater responsibilities' In truth, we are no longer dealing with a human being who demands accounts from others, but with God, who bestows his infinite riches upon us who have faithfully administered the portion of the capital entrusted to us.

The meaning of the parable makes us realise the extent of God's gifts by the terrific punishment meted out to the third servant who simply buried his master's money in the ground in order to hand it back intact when the master returned. Contrary to his companions, he did not understand that he had to profitably invest his fortune – he lacked initiative. We might reproach such a master for his harshness and even more, his injustice. What right has anyone to punish such servants? However, everything changes when we speak about God and his servants. If we regard ourselves bound to God by a contract in human terms, if we regard religion as the strict fulfilling of a certain number of duties taken on through servile fear, we misunderstand who God is, we insult him and we declare ourselves unworthy of entering into joy. Jesus is speaking to us of his coming. On that day we will all be judged on what we have done. The time of the Lord's absence is, for us, the time for active waiting. God wants us to behave in a responsible manner, to be enterprising and apply ourselves to what we are doing. He does not ask us to do great things, but to discharge the tasks assigned to us. The grace of God is not something inert, that can be buried in the soil or hidden under a mattress. 'Take my grace out of its hiding place' Jesus would say, 'Make the best of the delay granted'.

The Irish charity 'Trócaire' urges people to give up some of their salary to help those who are really deprived in poorer parts of the world. In the Gospel Jesus tells us that we are to use the gifts, the talents we have been given to produce fruit. Some who imagine God as hard and demanding play safe and preserve their gifts rather than using them productively. They will be called to give an account of their shyness.

