

Thirty Third Sunday of Ordinary Time - November 19, 2017

Proverbs 31:10-13.19-20.30-31; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6; Matthew 25:14-30

The Church places before us today the last ordinary Sunday of the Church year and coming Sunday we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. In our liturgy we are reminded not just of the end of the liturgical year but of the end of all things and the preparations we need to make. Bible tells us that we are all created in the image and likeness of God and he has placed on us multiple gifts and blessings. He expects us to utilize these blessing for his kingdom and for his people and also develop the talents he has given us. He wants us diligent and watchful for the coming of the Lord who will take into account all that we have done. The Book of Proverbs speaks eloquently of the qualities of a worthy wife and while the text applies literally to 'the woman who fears the Lord', there is also a valid application to the qualities of each person who lives in expectation of the Lord. The passage emphasizes the industriousness and diligence of the good wife who is busy with useful matters, skilled at her work and cares for the poor. The Gospel of St. Matthew focuses more sharply on the Christian attitude towards earthly life as we live in expectation of the Master's return. The implicit responsibility of each servant is to work and to multiply the talents entrusted to him. It is not enough just to preserve what one has been given. The Master expects the results from the person who has been given special talents. St. Paul in the second reading reminds the Christians at Thessalonica of the unexpected but certain coming of the day of the Lord. He says that that day will strike like a sudden disaster on people's lives. Christians have been forewarned and are to stay alert and sober, and not remain asleep at this special moment.

The First Reading from the Book of Proverbs spoke of a very productive wife that bears fruit in all things. She never sits idle, using every opportunity presented to her to increase the family wealth. Because of her qualities, she is far more precious than jewels. This capable wife is trustworthy. The husband can count on her to be faithful and productive for the betterment of the home. She is not afraid to learn how to sew and make clothing for the members of the family in order to save money. From the money that she managed to save, she invests in land. There, she plants a garden in hope of selling the fruits of the seeds that she plants. Not counting the hours that come and go, night and day, she works long hours. While tending to the worldly needs of the family, she also tends to her spiritual needs and the needs of others. She gives generously to those in need. To

those seeking comfort, she speaks gentle words, only wisdom coming from her mouth. She is never idle, having no time for foolishness and gossip. Her children, who are well raised in values and ways of the Lord, show appreciation by thanking her and praising her for being such a happy and wonderful mother. Even her husband recognizes the treasure that he has in his possession, the best of the best. In a way, this wonderful woman is a picture of what we should be, always being fruitful in our ways. As the woman is more precious than jewels in the eyes of her family, we are called to be more precious than jewels in the eyes of the Lord.

In today's Second Reading from the Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul continues his discussion on the Parousia, the second coming of the Lord. He tells them what Jesus himself had said that his second coming would be unexpected and would come like the thief in the night. However, this should not frighten them since they would be prepared because they were living in their Christian faith. He tells them that since they are children of the light and children of the day, they should not worry about when the Lord shall return. It is sufficient for them to know that when the Lord does suddenly come as a thief in the night, either through His Second and final Coming on Judgment Day or when all Christians are individually called to appear before him at death, whichever comes first, they will be ready. People who nurture a false sense of security will be overtaken by surprise. Those who measure up to their Christian calling are always ready. They live their lives in constant daylight. No nighttime thief will bother them. The second coming of Christ will be a joyful event because they will be ready to receive him. Paul ends this passage with the advice that they have to be sober and must be alert all the time. They should not go on sleeping, as everyone else does, but stay wide awake to receive the Lord.

Today's Reading from the Gospel of Matthew involved two stories. The first reminded us of the necessity to be watchful at all time. The second, the Parable of the Talents, informed us as to why we must persevere in our living faith, why we must be fruitful in all our thoughts, our words and our actions. Jesus gives his disciples and the Pharisees this parable to illustrate and emphasize the teaching of the Kingdom of Heaven and how everyone will be judged according the use he makes of the gifts God gives to human persons. Again, this parable is the story about the final judgment that will come at the Parousia. The drama of the story emerges from actions of three servants who have been entrusted with large sums

of money from their master so that they would use the amount profitably while he is away. These sums are described in terms of talents. The value of a talent was high, equivalent to fifteen years wage earned by an ordinary worker. The master gave different amounts to each of the servants depending on their ability. Indeed every individual on earth receives different gifts and this gift is gratuitous. Having handed over these large sums, the master goes on a journey from which after a long time he will return. The question guiding the parable is what each servant will do with the sum of money the master has placed under his care.

On his return, the master, a real businessman, questioned each servant as to what use he had made of the money given him and what profit he had gained. The first two servants wisely invested their large sums and ended up doubling the master's money. It is needless to say that the master is totally pleased with these two servants who have acted so responsibly and creatively. It is not the talent given to each that matters but the way they have made use of those talents. Men may not have equal talents but they can be equal in their effort. Because they have shown such responsibility with what is referred to as a small matter, they are not asked to rest and relax. The master will give them now bigger and better responsibilities for their fidelity in service. Not only that, the master will invite them to share in his joy. By all standards these two servants have done well, acted responsibly, and have been fully recognized and accepted by the master on his return. Henceforth they would not be servants or slaves but would have an honored place in their master's household.

The third servant does not fare so well. He simply buried his master's money in the ground and waited for him to return. He chose the most cautious and least risky course of action available to him. When the master asks for the accounting on his return, this servant gives back exactly what he had been given, no more and no less. He had shown no creativity and in the master's view he had acted irresponsibly. This servant knew what was expected of him but failed out of fear. He tries to give all possible excuses to his master saying that he knew how hard and demanding the master was and therefore did not risk investing his money in case he should lose it. The employer is very angry. At the very least, the money could have been put in a bank and earned a modicum of interest. As it was, it produced absolutely nothing. This servant is severely condemned by the master as being both wicked and lazy. As a result he loses everything and ends up

being cast out into the darkness. The talent he had left lying idle is taken from him and given to one of the honest and willing servants. Because he refused to earn anything for his master whom he called hard and exacting, he is not admitted into his master's household. His warm relationship with the hard working servants indeed shows that he also a kind and generous person.

The parable of today gives us four important lessons. First, it tells us that God gives each person different gifts. Despite our tendencies always to compare ourselves with others, the actual number and quality is not important. We are only asked to make full use of what we have been uniquely given and to use them for the benefit of the community as a whole. When everyone does that, the community is enriched. Second, our work is never completed. The first two servants showed how much they had earned; they were not told they could sit back and rest. Rather because of their trustworthiness, even greater responsibilities were given to them. The more one has, the more will be given to him. Third, the person who does nothing will be punished. The man with one talent did not lose it. He did not do anything at all with it. If he had tried and failed, he would have met compassion and forgiveness. Even the person with one miserable talent has something to offer to others. It is a sober warning that it is not just those who do evil deeds who will lose out but also those who have no positively good works to show. Every person has the responsibility to be active in the Kingdom. Finally, to the one who has more will be given; from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. It seems rather unfair, like robbing the poor to pay the rich. But Jesus is rather saying that those who share generously the gifts they have been given are likely to find themselves constantly enriched. Those who jealously preserve what they have been given, hoard it and go into their shell in fear of the outside world are likely to shrivel up and die. Those who save their lives will lose it; those who share generously what they have with others, will find themselves immeasurably enriched. It is the law of the Gospel; it also a law of life which many of us, in practice, find hard to believe.

Jesus' story of the talents teaches us to boldly prefer taking active risk in our lives over passive complacency. It tells the way Jesus will act with us when we do not utilize properly the talents he has so generously given us and expects a positive contribution from us. In this parable we have a man who was going on a journey and who summoned his slaves is a picture of Jesus. As the man entrusted his slaves with some talents, Jesus also entrusted us with spiritual gifts that have

been bestowed upon us through the Holy Spirit. Through his gratuitous invitation, we have received the opportunity to become children of God. He has given us the opportunity to come closer to him through the Holy Spirit and the Eucharist. As the man expected his slaves to invest the talents that he had entrusted them with in order to be fruitful, the Lord Jesus also expects us to be fruitful. He expects us to appreciate all of the gifts that have just been aforementioned, not only appreciate them but also use them to their greatest potential. Our personal efforts and growth to mature spiritually in Christ are the end result that the Lord seeks from us. It is perhaps remarkable that, although the parable applies to an eschatological setting, the qualities praised are specifically human; diligence and hard work. The parable seems to imply an ample space for initiative and creativity, for the personal involvement of each servant in answering how to use best the given talents. It is those servants who assume their responsibility and put their minds and hearts into creative ways of multiplying their capital who are praised.

The Gospel of today focuses more sharply on the Christian attitude towards earthly life as we live in expectation of the Master's return. This passage, however, goes further in pinpointing the ultimate purpose of our activities. It is the parable of the talents. The parable contains words of advice for the interim period between Christ's resurrection and his final return. It urges a responsible use of the goods the Master has entrusted to us so that we may be ready to face him when he calls us to account. It is in this context that another interpretation has been given to the parable. Namely, that it is a criticism of a religious tradition which refuses to develop. This is a constant phenomenon of all religions, including our own. Many of the Jews in Jesus' time jealously protected the Law and tradition. They were opposed to any change or any development. In the process, they forgot the original spirit of the Law and naturally were opposed to Jesus, who constantly criticized this stance. In our Church today, there are people who do not want to change anything, who want to go back to the old ways of doing things. Today let us spend some time reflecting on what particular talents or gifts God has given us. Some of us are clearly very gifted but there is no one, absolutely no one, who can say they have been gifted with nothing. Let us ask ourselves how we are using our particular gifts in the service of our Christian community and the wider society. Let us be prepared to respond to Jesus when he takes account of the talents he has generously given to us.

An old legend relates that long ago God had a great many burdens which He wished to have carried from one place to another on earth, so He asked the animals to lend a hand. But all of them began to make excuses for not helping: the elephant was too dignified; the lion, too proud; and so on. Finally the birds came to God and said, "If you will tie the burdens into small bundles, we'll be glad to carry them for you. We are small but we would like to help." So God fastened upon the back of each one a small bundle, and they all set out walking across the plain to their destination. They sang as they went, and did not seem to feel the weight of their burdens at all. Every day the burdens seemed lighter and lighter, until the loads seem to be lifting the birds, instead of the birds carrying the burdens. When they arrived at their destination, they discovered that when they removed their loads, there were wings in their place, wings which enabled them to fly to the sky and the tree tops. They had learned how to carry their burdens, and their loads had become wings to carry them nearer to God. Burdens we carry for others may become wings of the spirit, to lift us into happiness such as we have never known.

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