

## Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A - Developing His Given Talents

November 19, 2023

The parable in this Sunday's gospel reading (Matthew 25:14-30) is so well known, that the word, 'talent', has become part of our language. The original story of Jesus, however, had a far more serious message than the development of natural gifts. The 'talent' Jesus refers to was an enormous quantity of precious metal (26 kgs of gold or silver). The immensity of the wealth entrusted to the servants was far beyond the experience of Jesus' hearers. The parable challenges them to recognize that God's immense blessings bring great responsibilities. The sharp edge of the parable, as Matthew reports it, seems to indicate a background of controversy. It may well be that the original parable of Jesus was a challenge to the Sadducees – the conservative Temple establishment who were not open to wholesome developments that had taken place in the biblical tradition, and were opposed, therefore, to the mission of Jesus. In their self-centred conservatism, the Sadducees had no concern to carry forward Israel's mission to be 'a light to the nations'. As the parable was recalled in Matthew's community, however, it may have been directed against the dangers of complacency in that community - that settled for the minimum requirements of life as the Lord's disciples, and was not ready to set out upon the great adventure of putting into practice the program of the Sermon on the Mount. The conclusion, ***'To anyone who has will be given more; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away'*** – a saying of Jesus that appears several times in the gospels – was probably added by Matthew, to drive home the point of the parable. Its meaning for Jesus was that one who is spiritually open will enjoy God's on-going blessings; whereas one who is closed will miss the opportunities offered them. Matthew emphasizes the seriousness of the parable's lesson by concluding his narrative – as he does in other places - with reference to the 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' in store for those who have no place in the Kingdom.

The parable of Jesus points to the 'Day of the Lord' when God's people will be called to account for the responsibilities brought by the great blessings they have received. In the second reading from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians (5:1-6), Paul continues his instruction concerning the Lord's return, echoing the imagery used by Jesus in the gospels. Life must go on; the 'Day of the Lord' will come 'like a thief in the night'; God's people must 'stay awake and be sober', living as 'children of the light'. It is not difficult to see that these themes provide the background of today's parable. The master is a long time in coming, and arrives unexpectedly to 'go through the servants' accounts'. The servants who have administered well the wealth entrusted to them are to be entrusted with 'greater things'; they will share in 'their master's happiness – 'a clear reference of the blessings of the final Kingdom. If we appreciate the greatness of the blessings brought by faith in Christ, we will be aware of the responsibilities they bring.

The master in today's parable stands for Christ. The servants stand for each one of us. That's the first lesson we should think about. Do we think of ourselves as servants, as dependent on God? In this fallen world, most people tend to think of themselves as the center of the universe. And our contemporary society, so full of technological power and easy pleasures, increases that tendency of our fallen nature. But this parable and many others are very clear: we are not God; we are not the center of the world; we are dependent upon God and our job in this life is to know him, love him, and serve him. Only by doing that will we find the happiness we desire, because doing that is what we were created for. The parable

also tells us how we are supposed to do that. God has given each of us a certain number of "talents." In Greek that word referred to a large sum of money. In the actual meaning of the parable, however, it refers more to what the English word implies - all the abilities, gifts and blessings we have received from God. We are expected to make full use of them for God's glory. God has given them to us, and we are free either to squander our gifts, burying them in the hole of self-indulgence, fear, laziness, and greed, or to use them as Christ would have us use them, which is the secret to happiness in this life and the life to come.

Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta was someone who learned this lesson perfectly. One of the many stories of how she impacted the lives of the poor illustrates beautifully what it means to use our God-given talents well. Once she was staying with a community of sisters working with the Aborigines in Australia. While she was there, she visited an elderly man who lived in total isolation, ignored by everyone; his home was disordered and dirty. She told him, "Please let me clean your house, wash your clothes and make your bed." He answered, "I'm OK like this. Let it be." She said, "You will still be better if you allow me to do it." He finally agreed. While she was cleaning, she discovered a beautiful lamp, covered with dust; it looked like it hadn't been used in years. She said to the man, "Don't you light that lamp? Don't you ever use it?" He answered, "No. No one comes to see me. I have no need to light it. Who would I do it for?" Mother Teresa asked, "Would you light it every night if the sisters came?" He replied, "Of course." From that day on, the sisters committed themselves to visiting him every evening. Mother Teresa left Australia. Two years passed. She had completely forgotten about that encounter. Then she received a message from him: "Tell my friend that the light she lit in my life continues to shine still." In a sense, our life-mission is to do precisely that: to invest our talents in such a way that we light as many lamps as possible, in as many different ways as possible, bringing the Good News of God's trustworthiness, forgiveness, and love to all the people who are sick and dying with loneliness, selfishness, and regret. The ordinary deeds of love offered for the benefit of others may not seem to matter much but are most important in the eyes of God. Ordinary work, done with love and a willing heart, helps the love of God to be made visible in the dark corners of life. Few of us will be given the opportunity of performing the spectacular, but whatever job we carry out with enthusiasm, avoiding apathy and the 'couldn't care less' approach, we can offer back to the Father the lives given to us, more fulfilled and enriched.

As the Pope says in one of his recent Angelus address: **"It is a matter of 'transforming riches into instruments of fraternity and solidarity'".** If we develop the talents he has entrusted to us, the day will come when the Father will say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servants." The church and the world need Christians proactively seeking to serve where need is greatest. The saints have been eloquent models of such initiative. St. John Bosco saw the displaced boys in the streets due to the industrial revolution, so he started an orphanage and trade schools. Dr. Moscati served his community as a medical doctor and researcher. St. Katharine Drexel saw the struggles of African-Americans and Native Americans, so she founded schools for them. St. Teresa of Calcutta saw the homeless dying unloved in the streets, so she created homes for the dying. The Holy Spirit speaks to us through prayer and Scripture, but also through our talents and the needs around us. We must prayerfully discern to see where and how God is asking us to serve.

There are three steps we must follow in order to invest our gifts well - from a supernatural perspective. First, we must identify what our gift is. We should always thank God for all countless blessings, but we should also reflect on the one or two strong characteristics or talents that God has given us personally. What type of thing do you enjoy most? What type of activity has always made you excited? What personality characteristic have people always complimented you on? What have you always

dreamed of doing but were afraid to get started on? The second step is to get right with God and stay that way. The third servant left his life-mission unfulfilled because he didn't have a good relationship with his master. We will follow his tragic path unless we pray daily, clean our consciences every week or every month by going to confession, and continue to study the Bible and Church teaching; this is how we get to know our Lord and Savior and stay connected to the vine; and unless we do that, our talents will bear no fruit. The third step: put our gift at the service of others. Be creative, be courageous, be like Christ! He left us his new commandment - to love one another as he has loved us. And he showed us what love really is: to give our lives for others. Christ came to serve and service to others helps us to grow in his image and likeness. We give our lives by putting our talents at the service of those around us instead of just serving ourselves. Today Jesus will give us yet again the perfect example of this self-giving in this Mass, through the Eucharist. When we receive him in Holy Communion, let's ask Christ to show each one of us exactly where he wants us to make our next supernatural investment, and let's beg him for the courage to do and promise that starting this week, we will go out and courageously invest our God-given gifts.