

33rd Sunday, Cycle A

(Prov 31:10-31; 1 Thes 5:1-6; Matt 25:14-30)

We all know that there are parables and then there are parables. There are short parables, such as the leaven and the mustard seed. There are beautiful parables, such as the prodigal son and the Good Samaritan. There are parables which call for a judgment from the hearers, such as the parable of the vineyard, which asks: "what will the owner of the vineyard do to those murderers?" There are parables that are somewhat amusing, for example those that call for perseverance, such as the "friend at midnight" who pounds on the door till the neighbor gets up and gives him what he wants, or the widow who is so insistent that the unjust judge resolves her case for fear she would end up by doing him violence.

There are parables that leave us genuinely puzzled, for example, why does the Lord praise the unjust steward? And the parable of the wedding banquet, that poor man is dragged in off the streets and then is cast into the outer darkness because he didn't have on a wedding garment.

And there are parables that we might call "transparent," such as the wise and foolish virgins from last Sunday, which can be easily understood to mean, "Be vigilant always, because you know not the day or the hour." Some are transparent once they have been explained and we hear them time and again, such as the parable of the sower. Others we may not like because they ARE transparent and we may wish they weren't, such as today's, the parable of the talents.

The word "talent" takes on many shades of meaning. Primarily it means a value in money as, on the face of it, it does in today's parable. A talent was a very large sum of money, but it's almost impossible to tie it down in terms of modern dollars. One source places its value as equal to 57 pounds of silver. At that rate, the servant who owed his lord 10,000 talents was in BIG trouble! Poor guy! Actually that "poor guy" is YOU and it represents how big a debt you owe God. Of course God is merciful and will forgive you that debt, BUT only on condition you forgive your fellow servant the trifling debt he or she owes you.

We know we are to apply the message of the parables to ourselves. Although today's parable speaks in terms of money, we need to understand it symbolically. Another meaning of talent, actually derived from today's parable, is a "special natural ability, aptitude, gift committed to one for use and improvement." We all have gifts from God and God expects us to employ them in service of His kingdom. We know what happened to the servant who buried his talent in the ground. The master was pretty ticked off at his indolence: the punishment was "to be cast into the outer darkness." But suppose it had been the servant who had received five talents and had simply buried them in the ground. What indolence! What waste! A much greater punishment!

So what does this mean to us? As I look out at this group, I see plenty, perhaps most of you, who are five talents. Not in terms of money, of course, but in terms of gifts that enable them to do things. This means God

expects YOU to do good things with them, good things in terms of advancing God's work. The servants weren't given the talents to possess for themselves, but to use them to advance their Lord's kingdom. There are people who use their God-given talents simply for their own ends--to become more beautiful, more popular, wealthier, more powerful. No matter how much energy they expend in such endeavors, they are simply being indolent, burying their master's talents in the ground, rather than using them for the purpose for which He has entrusted it to them.

How do we go about "trading with our talents" to provide what our Lord wants of us? Perhaps we can find a hint from our first reading. Unfortunately, the translation in our lectionary is not the best; rather than "When one finds a worthy wife," the NABRE more accurately translates, "Who can find a woman of worth?" Our culture is apt to think first in masculine terms, but here the feminine is preferred. Actually, the parable we are considering is about any person, so the sense here could include, "Who can find a man of worth?" Our lectionary also omits many helpful verses that are in the Bible. Included should be: "Like a merchant fleet,/ she secures her provisions from afar./ She rises while it is still night, and distributes food to her household, .../She picks out a field and acquires it;/ from her earnings she plants a vineyard./ She girds herself with strength; she exerts her arms with vigor./ She enjoys the profit from her dealings;/ her lamp is never extinguished at night."

I'm not saying all this is applicable to us, but it

certainly depicts a figure of generous effort, of loving concern for those in her care. She is far from indolent or self-seeking. Each of us is necessarily and rightfully employed in whatever is our calling, whatever that might be. If a man is married man, he needs to be a good provider, a good husband and father; if a woman is married, she needs to be a good wife and mother; many of you have other responsible positions. When you do these things, you are rightfully employing your talents and advancing God's kingdom. But it must be done with love—love that is warm and outgoing; “cold love” is a contradiction in terms. Smiles help, too. Another verse tells us, "She reaches out her hands to the poor,/ and extends her arms to the needy": a reminder that the proper employment of our talents includes generosity to those less fortunate than ourselves, something our politicians are not always alert to do.

Today is the last Sunday in ordinary time (next Sunday is Christ the King), and so our second reading looks forward to the end of the world and the return of the Lord (when we shall be called to render to the Lord how we have employed the talents entrusted to us). It reminds us that He will come "like a thief at night," so we must always be prepared. It reminds that we are children of the light and children of the day. Many of those living in our society are not so graced, and St. Paul reminds us that we must not live as they do. This reading ends, and it is a good place for me to end, by urging you, with St. Paul: "Therefore, let us not sleep as the rest do, but let us stay alert and sober," as we trade with our talents to make the world worthy to

welcome “Christ the King.”