

November 22, 2020

# Father Ed's Sunday Reading (continued)

And again, as last week, 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.

Last week, the story of the ten bridesmaids waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom, was about constant readiness for the final coming of Christ. Today's Mass is rather about the preparations we need to make.

The Second Reading reminds us that the Day of the Lord will come "like a thief in the night", when we least expect it, when we are least ready. "We do not belong to the night or to darkness, so we should not go on sleeping, as everyone else does, but stay wide awake and sober." And what should we be doing while we are wide awake (and, hopefully, sober!) in anticipation of the Lord's coming?

The First Reading suggests that we should be as diligent and industrious as a loyal and faithful wife. A perfect wife, Proverbs says, "is far beyond the price of pearls". She is hardworking, mainly for her family, but she also "holds out her hand to the poor, she opens her arms to the needy". Her value is not in her charm or her beauty but in her wisdom, that is, in her awareness of where the real priorities in life lie.

The Gospel passage, however, goes further in pinpointing the ultimate purpose of our activities. It is the parable of the talents. Literally, one talent was a very large sum of money, equivalent to thousands of dollars today. 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.

We see in the parable an employer entrusting his property to each of three servants to administer while he is away. They are not given the same amount and this implies that they have different abilities, or 'talents' as we would say today. It is also implied that different returns are expected from different abilities. People are not competing against each other, only against themselves.

The first two, of whom one received five talents and one received two talents, traded with what they had been given and doubled their capital. The third, however, the one who received the least, "went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money".

In the Greek text, the word used for "gained" or "made" was used in religious contexts for winning converts. Thus the parable suggests that we are talking about the kind of "profit" a Christian is meant to be aiming at, which has nothing to do with dollars and cents. The man, therefore, who dug his single talent was guilty of keeping it purely for himself and not risking its exposure to others who could have benefited from his efforts.

"A long time after", suggesting the long period between Jesus' resurrection and his coming again, the employer returns to call his servants to account. He is very pleased with the first two who had done so well as to double their original capital. Because they had shown such trustworthiness and a willingness to take risks over what was relatively little, they could now be confidently entrusted with much more. They could enter the "joy of their lord", namely the Kingdom of God.

The third man came forward and sheepishly offered his single talent. He had been afraid of his master. "I had heard you were a hard man, reaping where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered. Here is the talent; it is yours, take it back." 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. One is reminded here of the branches on the vine which have no fruit and get thrown into the fire. In terms of the Gospel, it speaks of the Christian, who may be very devout, but who makes no contribution whatever to the life of the Christian community or to its mandate to give witness to the Gospel before the world (something that can be far more risky than commercial trading).

Discussing this passage, William Barclay [one of my favorites] makes four useful points:

a. *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.

**b. *Our work is never completed.***

When the first two servants showed how much they had earned, they were not told they could sit back and rest. No, because of their trustworthiness, even greater responsibilities were given to them. "To everyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough."

**c. *The one who will be punished is the one who does nothing.***

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. (The image of the master as a "hard man" only emphasises that, if with such a person one should make an effort, all the more should one try where a loving, understanding and compassionate God is concerned.) 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. Saying "But I didn't do anything!" will not get one off the hook!

**d. *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.

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 criticised 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. They want to bury the Spirit of God in the napkin of tradition. They want old wine in old wineskins. This is not the way to Life.

Finally, we need to spend some time reflecting – and why not today? – 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. And we can ask ourselves how are we using our particular gifts in the service of our Christian community and the wider society? Any other use of them is to bury them in a napkin and render them unproductive. If we were to die today and met Jesus and he asked us, "How did you use the gifts and talents I gave you? Who benefited and how from those gifts?" What would you be able to say in reply?

And the Master is going to come back, "like a thief in the night", so we need to be ready. If you have buried that talent or used it in only selfish ways, get out there quickly and get it working for the Kingdom.