

Enter into the Joy of Your Master!

Thirty-third Sunday of the Year – Cycle A – November 15, 2020

Readings: Prov 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31; 1 Thess 5:1-6; Mt 25:14-30

“Well done good and faithful servant ... enter into the joy of your master!” (Mt 25:21,23)

Prologue: If today’s gospel ‘parable of the talents’ is seen only in terms of capital and competitive gains, it might give a wrong message, namely, ‘compete with others, defeat your competitors, and you will be rewarded’. However, rather than shower down gifts from outside, God gives Godself to you and me in self-donation through the Spirit. How we cooperate with God from within to double these gifts will either see us doubling our joy and entering into God’s Eternal Joy or “thrown into the outer darkness”. The discernment, the decision is yours, is mine. Act wisely!

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. In the parable of the talents, the master embarking upon a journey really did not have any obligation to give anything to any of his slaves. Moreover, if the third slaves’ assessment of him was right, he would have done one of the two options open to him: (a) given the money to bankers for safekeeping, which would reap interest upon return; or (b) dug a deep hole in his backyard to bury his money. The fact that he chooses a third option, i.e., “*entrusted* his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability” (vv.14-15), amply indicates that he is a generous, trusting and hopeful creditor who knows what each one is capable of. The amounts given—i.e., five, two and one talent—indicate the great generosity and goodness of the giver since, as a unit of currency, one talent was worth about 6,000 denarii, and a denarius was the usual payment for a day’s labour. Calculating at one denarius per day, a single talent was therefore worth 16 years of labour: a huge sum, indeed. The joy and enthusiasm of the first slave is evident since he “*went off at once* and traded with them, and made five more talents” (v.16). Mindful of the benevolence of the giver, the incredible value of the gift given-and-received, and the fact that the master thought so highly of his trustworthiness and capabilities, made him joyful, hopeful and ready to take any risk to ensure that the master’s trust was not betrayed. Nothing is said of the second slave, but he too goes off and converts two into four!
2. Trading is risky business. It involves discussion, discernment and decision. Moreover, it demands trusting, surrendering, giving up and letting go. But, wouldn’t the first two slaves have thought that the very fact that the master had given them so much was proof enough that much was expected of them? So, keeping the master’s generosity and goodness close to mind and heart, they double the gift: five becomes ten; two becomes four! 100% profit! Their risky gamble of giving away pays rich dividends. When material benefits are given away, one no longer has them; but, when one’s own life, one’s inner gifts and the Spirit are given away, surrendered and shared with others, one reaps rich reward. Even more, the returns are not mere fractions and fragments but a doubling—a hundredfold harvest (Mt 13:8,23). The joy of giving away is felt not only while receiving rich dividends in the trading itself; but, even more, by hearing those congratulatory comments of the master: “*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.*” This joy of sharing inner life with the master is much greater than any other gift that the slaves could’ve ever received. Notably, though the first two slaves got unequal amounts as gifts, their reward is the same: fullness of joy.

3. The attitude of the third slave is surprising. No risk-taking, no reflection on the ‘*what*’, ‘*why*’, ‘*how*’ and ‘*when*’ of the master’s giving, going and coming. Worse still, he doesn’t even think of himself and question *why* he should have received so much. Only one motive guides his actions: fear. He makes an excuse: “I knew that you were a harsh man ... so I was *afraid*, and I went and hid your talent in the ground” (vv.24-25). He not only fails to *cooperate* with the Spirit by failing to gauge the giver’s generosity and goodness and his own capacity to do something good, but he does the very opposite of what he should have done, namely, he tries to possess what was not his by burying it. One can neither possess the Spirit selfishly as one’s own nor bury the spirit given to each one. He gets what he deserves—the exact opposite of what was said to the first two—“wicked and lazy”. He loses even the little that he has, for according to the laws of the Spirit and spiritual gifts one must “use it or lose it”. Had he used his common sense, going to the bankers would’ve been less effort than spending time to dig a hole! Interpreted alternatively, this third servant signifies the Pharisees and scribes, who are stuck, stubborn and stagnant in their traditions. This view is based on the term “hand over” (vv.14,20,22): a technical term for tradition. Today, it could refer to clergymen who seek security, avoid risks and fearfully cling to traditions emptied of the Spirit.

Linking the 1st & 2nd Readings and the Psalm (128) to the Theme of Cultivating Virtue

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings attributed to Solomon, but probably appeared much after his time—i.e., after 500 BC. Today’s first reading (Proverbs) and the psalm (128) complement each other in that while the former describes the qualities that wives must inculcate; the latter speaks of the virtues of husbands. Both must be God-fearing (Prov 31:30 & Ps 128:1,4) and both must work hard (Prov 31:13 & Ps 128:2). By this, their family will be happy and blessed. Note that this responsibility is not limited to the family, but extends to the community too: “open out hands to the poor and reach out hands to the needy” (Prov 31:20). Everyone is expected to give to others from the gifts they have received.

In the second reading, Paul speaks of “times and seasons” in the context of the “Day of the Lord.” Here, the theme of unexpectedness and the need for preparedness is highlighted. The “thief in the night” and “sudden labour pains that come upon a pregnant woman” are images that Paul uses to stress the end-times. However, believers in Christ need not fear since they “are all children of light and children of the day” (v.5).

Apt Anecdotes:

The late, legendary American violinist, Yehudi Menuhin, was but seven when he performed Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto in public. Aged ten, his violin recital at London’s Royal Albert Hall was so phenomenal that Albert Einstein who heard him reportedly whispered to the child prodigy, “Today you’ve proved to me that there’s a God in heaven!” Indeed, when God-given gifts are treasured and worked upon, one gets a glimpse of God and a foretaste of heaven.

Novelist Sinclair Lewis was once besieged by college students for a lecture on the art of writing. The students said that they had a deep desire to be writers. Lewis began his talk with: “How many of you earnestly yearn to be writers?” All hands went up. “Then,” said he, “there’s no need for me to lecture to you.... Hurry, go home, and write, write, write!” We might add, “practise, practise, practise!” It’s often said: “What we are is God’s gift to us, what we become is our gift to God.” When my life’s curtain comes down and when God closes the book of my life, hopefully, I’ll hear those words: “Well done! Come into the Joy of Your Master!”
