

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31

Psalms 127

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6

Matthew 25:14-30

Our Gospel today is one of the more puzzling parables of our Lord. A surface reading can make it seem like Jesus is plugging venture capitalism. Indeed, John Howard famously referred to this as the “pro-small-business” parable of the New Testament. In response, some readers of a more socialist bent flip the script, and make the man who buried the talent the hero of the story for refusing to participate in the evils of unbridled capitalism. A more common interpretation is to take advantage of the accidental double meaning of the word “talent”, and to draw the conclusion that we should not waste the talents and gifts that the Lord has given us, but rather that we should use them wisely. There’s no doubt some truth to this sentiment, but I think the real lesson goes a bit deeper. So let’s dig into the text a bit.

The action of the story is fairly straightforward. A master entrusts three servants with his wealth, and then leaves on a journey. He doesn’t give them specific instructions, but it’s clear that he expects them to invest what he has given them and gain a return.

Each servant, as we heard, is entrusted with something. The Greek word *τάλαντον* (talanton) is translated in English as “talent”, but it doesn’t mean here a positive skill such as artistic ability. Instead, in Jesus’ time a talent was a unit of measurement, a weight of precious metal – an ingot of about 35 kgs. A talent was tremendously heavy, and tremendously valuable – upwards of \$750,000 in today’s money. Talents were literally the fortunes of people of the ancient world – to have one was to be very wealthy, and to be a servant entrusted with one was to bear a huge responsibility. We may tend to inherently sympathise somewhat with the fearful servant, who was afraid to put his master’s fortune at risk and so buried it out of fear. But we can see how the master’s expectation of his servants is at once both trusting and demanding – he has given them much, and expects much in return.

As I’ve said, this Gospel is often interpreted as reminding us that God has given unique abilities to each of us which we are to put to use in return. Such an interpretation is not wrong, exactly, but it can quickly devolve into a homily that’s rather cliché – you know, make the most of all that God has given to you, strive to reach your greatest potential, and be the best that you can be. But Jesus is not here just to give us a pep talk. There’s something more going on.

For starters, it’s important to acknowledge that what each servant has been given is not really his – it still is the property of the master. The servant possesses it for a time, but the master is expecting the trust he has shown to be rewarded. As such, you could argue that servant who received the one talent, and who buried it in the ground, was not acting out of caution so much as cowardice. When the master returns, this

servant appears unassuming, claiming that he did not want to lose the investment of his demanding master. But this could just be an excuse for his inaction. The other servants are rewarded for their boldness, whereas the third is punished for his laziness.

The point of Jesus's parable, of course, is not really to give us advice about financial investments – rather, he's trying to impart to us a warning about our duty as Christians. In St Matthew's Gospel, this passage follows the one we heard last week about the ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom's return, and it continues the same theme: "Be ready; stay awake". This latter part of St Matthew's Gospel contains a series of descriptions about how to prepare for the end times – about what Jesus' followers should do after he ascends to the Father and prior to his Second Coming. And this just happens to be where we find ourselves—the era of the Church—and so we can consider this parable as having been addressed directly to us.

As with last week's Gospel, Jesus sees inaction during this period as quite problematic. This inaction can take different forms. For the foolish bridesmaids we saw last week, it was be a lack of vigilance, and failing to be ready for the Master's return. We can become too accustomed to this world—and too attached to its pleasures and attractions—focusing on the things we can see, and neglecting or even forgetting the eternal realities that we cannot presently see.

Inaction can also take the form of fear. Like the servants in the parable, we have been entrusted with talents – not gold or silver, and not even primarily our various positive qualities or abilities. Rather, we have been endowed with spiritual gifts from on high – gifts that ultimately belong to God, and which he lends to us to be utilised. The talents we have been given are spiritual treasures: forgiveness, patience, endurance, kindness, generosity, humility, temperance, courage – above all, faith, hope, and love. These do not belong to us – they are gifts from God. They are the result of his grace and they remain his even when they are within us. They have been given freely, but not without expectation.

If Jesus warned us last week that we can become drowsy—like the foolish bridesmaids who were unprepared for his return—then this week he warns us that we may misunderstand the nature of the graces that we as his believers have been given. Faith in Jesus can bring us new life, peace, and joy, but if we do not utilise this investment of grace to make the gift increase all the more—if we let it lie dormant, or bury it under the weight of our fear and insecurity—then Christ himself will call us to account upon his return. Our Master has made a strategic investment in us, and he hopes to receive from us a return of grace upon grace.

I think the key to understanding all this is the recognition that the divine arithmetic is nothing like the accounting of this world. Jesus knows a principle of return on investment that the billionaire investors of this world know nothing about – namely, that if we give away what has been given to us, we will be all the richer for it. In our world we tend to think of things as a zero-sum game – if I have something then someone else doesn't have it, and vice-versa. Winners and losers. But in the field of

love, the arithmetic is win-win. When it comes to love—especially the kind of love that God is calling us to—nothing is really ours until we give it away, and anything not given away is ultimately lost. And so if we bury the spiritual capital God that has invested in each of us and let it go unused, it will not be to our benefit. We are commanded to share what we have received, because this is ultimately for our own good. And if we fail to put the Gospel into practice here and now with the spiritual treasures we have been given, then we may not be ready for the heavenly banquet that Christ has prepared for us.

What does this look like in our lives?

Well, if we are not praying and seeking to grow in prayer, if we are not living the liturgical life of the Church, there's a decent chance we are burying our spiritual treasure.

If we are not seeking to go beyond the minimum, and regularly seeking to improve on our witness to Christ, there's a decent chance we are burying our spiritual treasure.

If we are not participating in the sacraments, most especially the Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation, and if we are living less than what the teachings of the Church call us to, there's a decent chance we are burying our spiritual treasure.

Each of these are difficult in one sense, but don't forget that Jesus calls us not to a life of comfort, but to a life of greatness, and this involves being challenged from time to time.

So let us strive to return the Lord's investment in us in the time that we have been given. Let us seek to share the faith with those who do not believe; to provide hope to those who are afraid; and to show love and mercy to everyone, just as they have been shown to us by God. As our readings assure us, Jesus is coming back, and he wants a return on what he has entrusted to us. May he find in us good and faithful servants, so that we may share his lasting joy.